

# Alaska

“On Location” is *Produced by*’s regular department providing essential information, both pro and con, regarding the experience of producing on location in both domestic and international venues.

Authentic locations are often impractical or expensive, and for any particular story, producers may find an excellent alternative that effectively doubles for the original setting. Spend any time in Alaska and one thing keeps resonating everywhere you visit: there’s no substitute for the real thing. Likewise, for imagined worlds, Alaska is full of natural wonders that could be that icy planet in a science fiction epic, or that fantasy realm of never-ending rivers and snow-capped mountains.

So why are so few theatrical features shot in Alaska? Misconceptions may provide part of the answer, as well as an incomplete understanding of the substantial benefits.

Alaska is hardly remote — just over five hours from Los Angeles to Anchorage on a direct flight (Alaska Airlines offers a daily non-stop flight, and has recently

expanded its service). Since tourism is one of Alaska’s biggest industries, transportation and accommodations are readily available in most places, especially in the low season (October–May). During the summer months, parts of Alaska have up to 24 hours of daylight, and the coveted “magic hour” can last up to four hours! The opposite is true of winter with its endless nights.

There are also increasingly more production resources, including a growing base of experienced crew. A whole new group of young Alaskan filmmakers are coming up through the state university film program, based at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and directed by associate professor Maya Salganek. According to Salganek, many of her students are paying their way through college by taking jobs on commercial and television shoots. “By the time they graduate,” said Salganek, “some

of these students have a lot of professional credits.”

Others, like Carolyn Robinson and Steve Rychetnik, are longtime industry professionals who came to Alaska years ago and forgot to leave. SprocketHeads, their Anchorage-based production company, produces commercial, industrial and documentary films. In addition, Rychetnik is an ASC cameraman and DP.

There’s no state sales tax in Alaska, and city taxes are relatively nominal.

Together with Alaska’s generous tax incentive program (set forth in more detail on pg. 73), producers should look seriously at Alaska for filming, especially for stories set in Alaska, but also for any other productions that could make effective use of the astonishing glaciers, ice caves, wildlife and wilderness Alaska has to offer.

Surprise Glacier



Sea lions bask off the coast of Shelter Island.

## ANCHORAGE

Local Film Liaison	Visit Anchorage/Kara Stowell
Average Temperatures	64°F (Summer)/4°F (Winter)
Accommodations	Hotel Captain Cook (546 rooms and suites)
Fine Dining	Crow’s Nest (Hotel Captain Cook)
Casual Dining	Snow City Cafe/Sack’s Cafe/Organic Oasis
Notable Locations	Crow Creek Mine/Potter Marsh
Film/TV Productions	Big Miracle (2012)/Into the Wild (2007)

## A good place to Anchorage

Juneau may be the capital of Alaska, but Anchorage is its biggest city and the hub for Alaska’s growing film industry. Many productions use Anchorage as a base, and most of Alaska’s industry professionals are located there.

Like a lot of Alaskans, Matt Szundy wears many hats — philosopher, mountain climber, stunt coordinator, locations manager and eco-tourism entrepreneur. A native New Yorker, his company Glacier Productions recently partnered with United Talent Agency to represent Alaska in the film industry.

“There’s a big misconception that Alaskans are stuck here and can’t wait for the opportunity to get away,” says Szundy. “The truth is, when I’m away for any length of time, I can’t wait to get back. Spending time anywhere else just reminds me how lucky I am to live in Alaska!”

Anchorage is a port city with a population of approximately 300,000. Downtown Anchorage is home to a number of large oil and gas corporations, as well as several Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs). Small family businesses

abound, but there’s also Walmart, Costco and Best Buy — and like anywhere in America, a Starbucks is never more than a few miles away. The production infrastructure in Anchorage is still growing, and large-scale productions will be challenged with respect to soundstages, post-production facilities and equipment rentals. But find a group of industrious Alaskans in the film community, and a workaround is probably just a brainstorming session away.

The Alaska Film Group is one such organization — a non-profit founded to represent the collective interests of Alaska’s film professionals. They are committed to building a film industry infrastructure, and the Alaska film incentive is a result of their consulting and lobbying efforts. Szundy is among the members, as are his friends and colleagues, Bob Crockett and Deborah Schildt of Piksik.

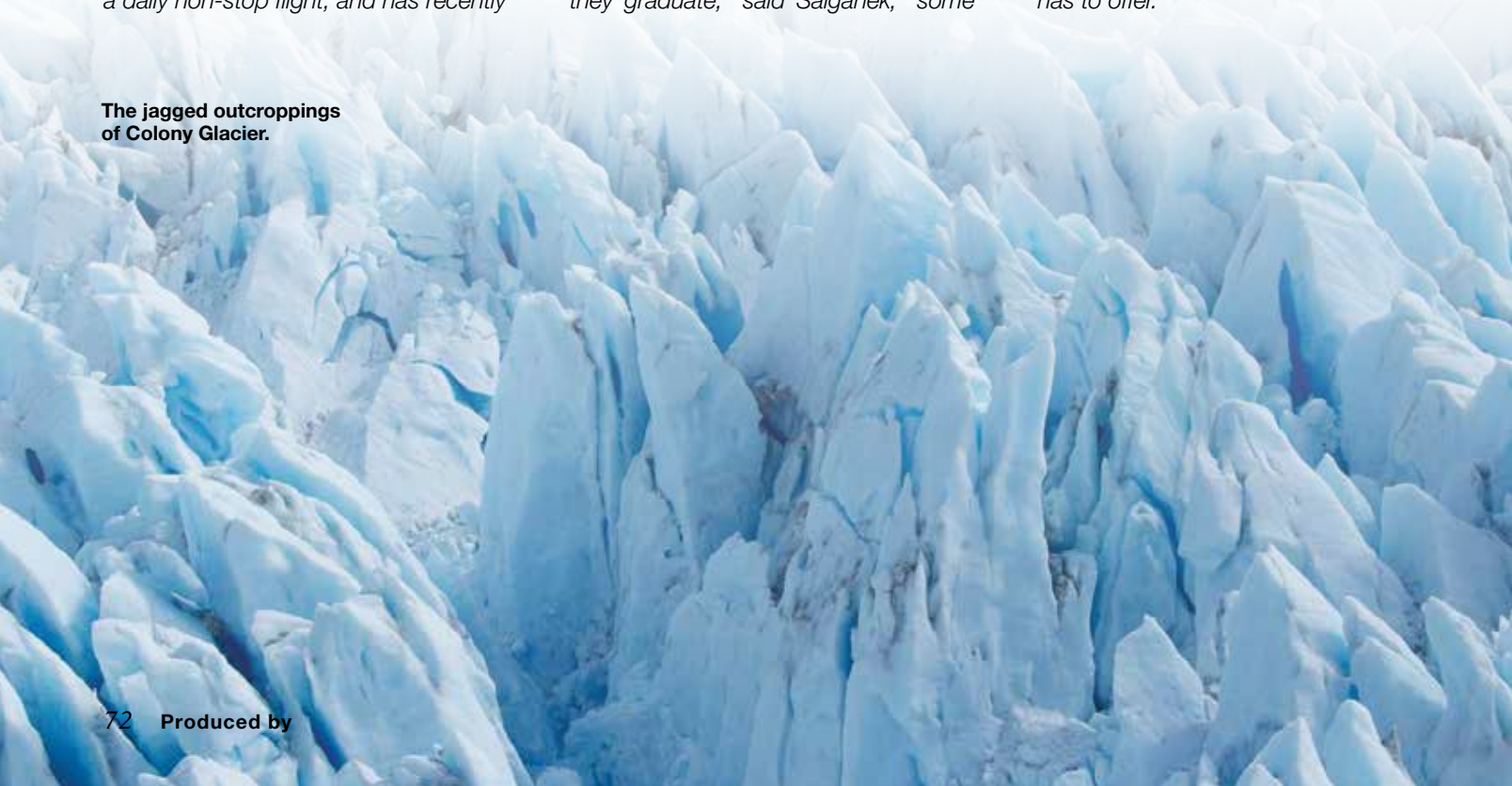
Piksik, LLC is a production services company based in Anchorage — a subsidiary of NANA Development Corporation, which is the business arm of an Alaska Native Corporation called NANA Regional Corporation, Inc.

## ALASKA NATIVE CORPORATIONS

The fascinating history of Alaska Native Corporations began with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, pursuant to which the United States Congress granted millions of acres of land and millions of dollars in cash settlements to 12 regions in Alaska, and established ANCs to administer those holdings for the benefit of Alaska Natives in each region, who are the sole shareholders.

Since the shares are not publicly traded, they have no value, and the income produced for the shareholders takes the form of relatively modest annual dividends. If the corporations were ever liquidated, the shareholders would be millionaires, but that is not likely to happen. Instead, the ANCs and their extensive subsidiaries take advantage of preferential treatment to win huge government contracts, most of which are subcontracted out to third-party, non-Native companies. It is a relatively complex system and hotly debated both inside and outside Alaska.

The jagged outcroppings of Colony Glacier.





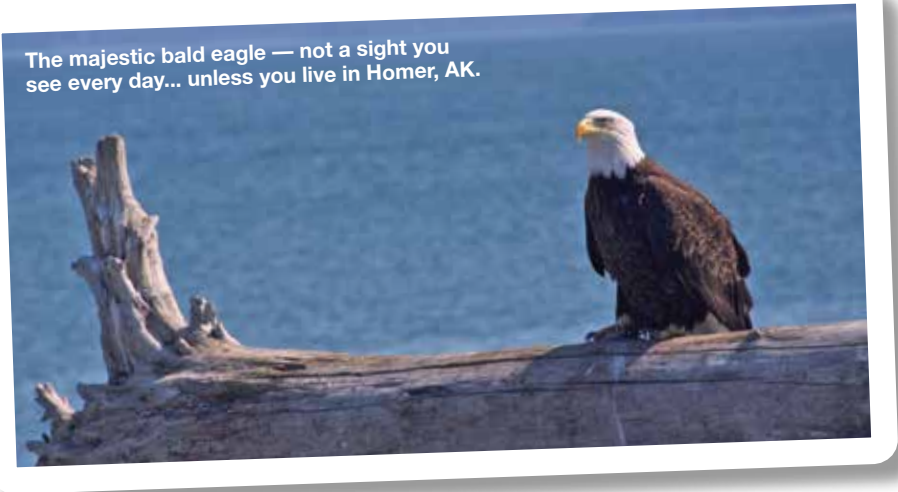
Piksik (an Iñupiaq word meaning “to jump up, rebound or spring back”) is just one layer of this multifaceted industrial conglomerate, which recently started investing in the film industry. (The parent company also owns 50% of LA-based Evergreen Films.)

“[NANA] saw an opportunity to take a lot of the services they provide for oil, gas and mining — catering, transportation, engineering, security, payroll — and cross over into the film industry,” says Bob Crockett, Piksik’s general manager.

Their offices in suburban Anchorage provide a broad range of production services, including office space, camera and equipment rentals, crew development location scouting, permitting and logistical support. “It’s not a huge piece of infrastructure,” Crockett acknowledges, “but nonetheless, it’s a piece of infrastructure designed for the film industry.”

Within the Anchorage film community, there is a strong desire to remedy some common misconceptions about the perceived challenges of filming in Alaska. “Most people see Alaska as a dark place full of snow and ice,” says Deborah Schildt, Piksik’s production manager. “Yes, we can get people on snow and ice 365 days out of the year, but they can come back to the Captain Cook, where a lot of film crews stay, enjoy a lovely dinner, go to the gym and work out, get a massage... For all the same reasons that tourism is our third biggest industry in Alaska, film crews enjoy themselves when they come here, regardless of the season.”

Schildt underscores a striking aspect of traveling in Alaska — the fact that major cities and towns are right on the edge of the middle of nowhere. South of Anchorage, in a valley along the scenic Seward Highway, is the resort town of



The majestic bald eagle — not a sight you see every day... unless you live in Homer, AK.

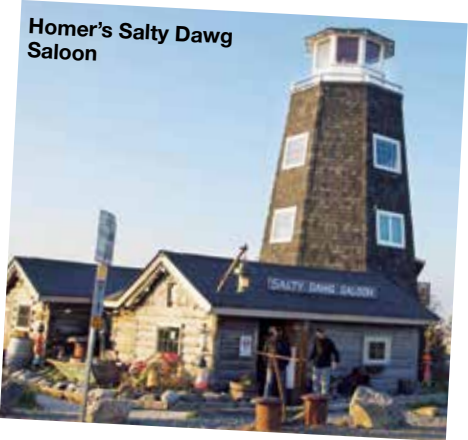
Girdwood, home of the Hotel Alyeska and Alyeska Resort, Alaska’s only organized ski resort. (Thrill-seekers consider any mountain with snow a potential ski resort.)

Girdwood is also home to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, a non-profit sanctuary for rescued wildlife. Each resident has a unique story, and while the animals belong to the state of Alaska, the Center has been granted guardianship — in some cases, permanent — of a variety of eagles, moose, bears, wood bison, elk and other animals. Founder and Executive Director Mike Miller is involved in every aspect of the Center, and he is surrounded by experts in animal sciences.

Since for various reasons some of the animals will never be re-introduced into the wild, the Center is also a resource for filmmakers who are looking for a safe way to film wildlife for their project. The Center works with certain animals to acclimate them to human interaction, and the Center itself has amazing water and wilderness locations with mountain backgrounds. Among many film and television productions to contract with the Center, Sean Penn’s *Into the Wild* is a standout. Producers shooting in Alaska with wildlife would be well served to engage the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center for locations and wrangling. All of the proceeds benefit the Center to further its wildlife rescue, rehabilitation and conservation activities.

While filming in and around Girdwood, cast and crew members will be thankful for their stay at the Hotel Alyeska, with its 304 guest rooms and suites, AAA Four-Diamond Seven Glaciers Restaurant (with panoramic views from 2,300 feet), and the best sushi in Alaska at Sakura Asian Bistro. In addition to Alyeska, Stefanie Flynn at The Bake Shop might be available for craft services or catering (sandwiches are made on their famous homemade sourdough — one of the oldest cultures in Alaska).

Alpine Air, with its experienced pilots and fleet of helicopters and small aircraft, can provide location scout, charter and aerial photography support for all sizes of projects. From Girdwood Airport, the experts at Alpine Air can take filmmakers directly into the Chugach Mountain Range, land on a glacier, or airlift them to an ice cave. All of these things can happen in Girdwood, a 45-minute drive from Anchorage.



Homer's Salty Dawg Saloon

ALASKA TAX INCENTIVES

The centerpiece of Alaska’s effort to expand its film and television industry is the Alaska tax incentive program — a transferable tax credit administrated by the Department of Revenue.

While the specifics can become complex depending on the size of the production, the highlights of the Alaska tax incentive are as follows:

- Minimum eligible spend is just \$75,000
- 30% base rate on Alaska ground spend (including non-resident below-the-line wages)
- 50% on Alaska resident wages
- Above-the-line non-resident wages receive 5% + 50% of resident wages + 50% of in-state transportation
- Additional 6% on rural spend
- Additional 2% on winter spend
- Additional 6% for the first episodic scripted television production that completes sixteen (16) episodes

The best way to take advantage of the tax incentive is to utilize as many locals as possible, and potentially receive 100% of resident wages and 80% of in-state transportation back. These tax credits are relative easy to sell without brokering, with an estimated return of approximately 85–90 cents on the dollar.

Because Alaska is so big — it is the largest of the 50 states in terms of land area, and twice the size of Texas — permitting can be a challenge. According to Dave Worrell, a development specialist with the Alaska Film Office, “Alaska is a jigsaw puzzle of land management,” so producers would be wise to take advantage of agencies like the Department of Commerce, companies like Piksik, or individual location scouts to assist in finding locations and identifying the applicable federal or state land management agency, Native tribe or private owner.

Homer’s Odyssey

About 225 miles south of Anchorage, along the Kenai Peninsula, is the fishing village of Homer, known to reality television viewers as the home port of the *F/V Time Bandit* (Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch*). Homer is also famous for its halibut, and the quality of food in this most unlikely of places is as surprising as it is delicious.

An eclectic mix of artists and fishermen, Homer is a place where truth and fiction collide. Jutting out from the mainland into Kachemak Bay, the Homer Spit represents a healthy dose of kitschy tourism mixed with a working fisherman’s wharf. There’s simply no way to pass by the Salty Dawg Saloon, with its Hobbit-like entrance, without going in. Visitors will be tempted to scribble a message on a dollar bill and pin it to a wall or ceiling beam, as hundreds of others have done.

Crew and above-the-line personnel can relax at Land’s End Resort, while star talent may want to stay in one of the six private guest accommodations at Kirsten & Carl Dixon’s Tutka Bay Lodge, cited in Fodor’s “100 Hotel Awards 2012” in the category of “Trips of a Lifetime.” The lodge is accessible by Mako’s Water Taxi (30 minutes across the Bay from the Homer Spit), seaplane or helicopter (landing directly on the main deck).

Kirsten Dixon is a world-class chef, having studied at Le Cordon Bleu Paris, and her husband Carl is an expert adventurer and knowledgeable guide. Together, they provide their guests with a culinary and wilderness experience that is intimately epic, and profoundly Alaskan. In fact, the entire staff at Tutka Bay Lodge is so authentic and spirited, cast members may not want to leave after they’ve wrapped!



Tutka Bay Lodge (Photo courtesy of Within the Wild Adventure Company)

HOMER	
Local Film Liaison	None
Average Temperatures	60°F (Summer)/24°F (Winter)
Accommodations	Land’s End (117 rooms + 33 luxury residences)
Fine Dining	Homestead/Saltry Restaurant
Casual Dining	La Baleine Café
Notable Locations	The Homer Spit/Halibut Cove/Seldovia
Film/TV Productions	Disneynature’s Bears/Deadliest Catch



No Vanity Fairbanks

Luxury is harder to come by in Fairbanks, the last major city before roads meet wilderness. While it may lack the massive mountains, rugged coastline and ancient glaciers of other parts of the state, Fairbanks does offer a gateway to the North — a number of remote places, including the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, are within reach by small aircraft. Fairbanks is also one of the best places in the world to see the aurora borealis or “northern lights” (August 21–April 21).

The University of Alaska Fairbanks offers some curiously modern architecture, including the Museum of the North, with its curved metallic lines. The juxtaposition of these contemporary structures against the background of rolling hills and prairie is striking. Another excellent location is the Chatanika Lodge, part of an abandoned gold camp, and the original site of the old Fairbanks Exploration Company. In the summertime, insect repellant is highly recommended to avoid desanguination by mosquitoes.

It’s worth noting that the Thai food in Fairbanks is surprisingly authentic and quite good. For more local fare, the Silver Gulch Brewery has the best beer-battered fish and chips this side of anywhere, and would be a great location for a wrap party.

FAIRBANKS	
Local Film Liaison	Explore Fairbanks/Amy Geiger
Average Temperatures	69°F (Summer)/3°F (Winter)
Accommodations	Pike’s Waterfront Lodge (208 rooms)
Fine Dining	Bobby’s Downtown/Lavelle’s Bistro
Casual Dining	Lemongrass Thai Cuisine/ Silver Gulch Restaurant
Notable Locations	Creamers Field/Chatanika Lodge
Film/TV Productions	Ice Road Truckers

You don’t know Juneau

The Gold Rush brought prospectors to Alaska, and it all started in Juneau. Alaska’s capital began as a mining settlement, and was the first town founded after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia. Cruise ship tourists arrive by the thousands almost every day during the high season, but their one-day visit to the Mendenhall Glacier, followed by a whale-watching tour, provides only a surface view of this historic seaside city. Juneau has some of the mildest temperatures in Alaska, although the weather is more unpredictable since it is essentially a rainforest.

Downtown Juneau is set against a mountainside, and locals like to compare the steep, narrow streets to San Francisco. There’s a strong Native influence, which creates an eclectic mix

when combined with the historic downtown buildings, the tourist-driven boardwalk, and the natural wonders (glaciers, mountains and fjords) just a short drive (or long hike) to the east and west.

Dolphin Tours is a great way to travel to the various nearby islands, and their boats are fast and large enough to carry crew and equipment. Location scouts will want to take the Goldbelt Mount Roberts Tramway, with its panoramic views down the Gastineau Channel, across to Douglas Island, and north into the Tongass National Forest.

Where else on earth can you see glaciers, humpback whales, sea lions, orcas, black bears, eagles, 10,000 tourists and the Governor in the same day?

Big Miracle, starring Drew Barrymore, John Krasinski, Ted Danson and Kris-

JUNEAU	
Local Film Liaison	Travel Juneau/Elizabeth Arnett
Average Temperatures	63°F (Summer)/34°F (Winter)
Accommodations	The Westmark Baranof (195 rooms and suites)
Fine Dining	The Gold Room (at The Westmark Baranof)
Casual Dining	Twisted Fish Company/ Tracy Crab Shack
Notable Locations	Ted Stevens Marine Research Institute/ Alaskan Brewing Co./Tracy Arm
Film/TV Productions	The Amazing Race/Top Chef



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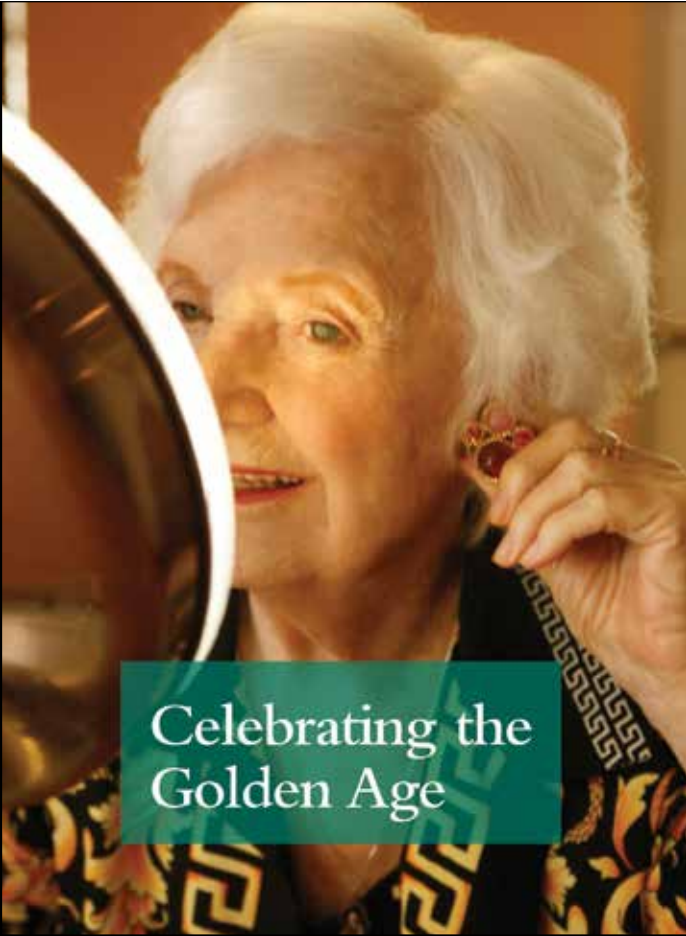
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## ON LOCATION

ten Bell, was one of the biggest feature films ever to shoot entirely in Alaska. Only two department heads on the production were local hires. Not surprisingly, they were Bob Crockett (Locations) and Deborah Schildt (Local Casting). In fact, almost everyone in the professional film community of Alaska worked on Big Miracle in some capacity.

Since the story was set in Alaska, director Ken Kwapis was committed to authentic locations. The needs of the script combined with the tax incentive made Alaska the obvious choice. The unit production manager was Robin Le Chanu, and as a non-resident hire, her perspective on the experience provides some context and objectivity.

While she acknowledges the obvious challenges, Le Chanu was also happy to recommend Alaska to other producers. She cited equipment rentals

and shipping as significant costs (trailers and other equipment were shipped to Alaska on a barge), and noted some difficulties finding crew with major studio film experience.

But she also adds, "There is no place I've ever been that looks like Alaska, or has that light."

The Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development is actively promoting Alaska as a film location, and some important steps have been taken to improve Alaska's film industry training and infrastructure. The tax incentive along with local investment reflects a developing industry with exciting potential.



"The commitment is there to help this industry grow," says Roberta Graham, assistant commissioner of the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development. "We know that Alaska will attract a certain type of film and a certain type of television and documentary production, but we're committed to telling the world our story."

The Alaskan experience, so powerful and unique among the 50 states, is also surprisingly under-represented on film. There's never been a better time to change that.

**-SCOTT SORRENTINO**

### RESOURCES AND SPECIAL THANKS:

Alaska Film Production Promotion Program — Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development  
[www.film.alaska.gov](http://www.film.alaska.gov)

Alaska Film Office/Department of Revenue — Tax Division  
[www.tax.alaska.gov/alaskafilmmoffice](http://www.tax.alaska.gov/alaskafilmmoffice)

Visit Anchorage/Kara Stowell  
[www.anchorage.net/film](http://www.anchorage.net/film)

Explore Fairbanks/Amy Geiger  
[www.explorefairbanks.com](http://www.explorefairbanks.com)

Travel Juneau/Elizabeth Arnett  
[www.traveljuneau.com](http://www.traveljuneau.com)

Alaska Film Group  
[www.alaskafilmgroupp.org](http://www.alaskafilmgroupp.org)

SprocketHeads, LLC/  
Carolyn Robinson  
[www.sprocketheads.com](http://www.sprocketheads.com)

Piksik, LLC/Bob Crockett  
[www.piksik.com](http://www.piksik.com)

Hotel Captain Cook  
[www.captaincook.com](http://www.captaincook.com)

The Hotel Alyeska/Michael Dutton  
[www.alyeskaresort.com](http://www.alyeskaresort.com)

Westmark Baranof Hotel/Traci Miller  
[www.westmarkhotels.com/juneau](http://www.westmarkhotels.com/juneau)

Tutka Bay Lodge/Kirsten Dixon  
[www.withinthewild.com](http://www.withinthewild.com)

Land's End Resort  
[www.lands-end-resort.com](http://www.lands-end-resort.com)

Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center/  
Mike Miller  
[www.alaskawildlife.org](http://www.alaskawildlife.org)

Alpine Air/Deb Essex  
[www.alpineairalaska.com](http://www.alpineairalaska.com)

Dolphin Tours/Robert Steinke  
[www.dolphintours.com](http://www.dolphintours.com)

Goldbelt Mount Roberts Tramway/  
Joann Flora  
[www.goldbelttours.com/mount-roberts-tramway/](http://www.goldbelttours.com/mount-roberts-tramway/)

The Bake Shop/Stefanie Flynn  
[www.thebakeshop.com](http://www.thebakeshop.com)

Sack's Cafe  
[www.sackscafe.com](http://www.sackscafe.com)

Snow City Café  
[www.snowcitycafe.com](http://www.snowcitycafe.com)

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[www.organicoasis.com](http://www.organicoasis.com)

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