

# **Louisiana Coushattas are examples of beneficial and sustainable tribal gaming**

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## **Summary:**

The Coushatta tribe of Louisiana are leaders in tribal economic and cultural progress. In contrast to their two sister tribes without gaming, The Louisiana Coushattas have experienced social, economic, and environmental benefits from gaming profits. They are paving the way for tribal cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and experiment new ways of bringing people together through social media.

The Louisiana tribe of Coushatta Indians is a perfect example of Native American gaming which is functioning properly and beneficial to all parties involved. The Coushatta Native Americans come from the original Koasati group before relocation, and 2 other main groups exist in Oklahoma and Texas. The Louisiana Coushattas were fairly early adopters to gaming on tribal land, obtaining their license in 1974. Since the sister groups of the Louisiana tribe do not have tribal casinos, the contrasting effects of gaming are very evident. The Louisiana tribe has been fairly trouble free legally, and their casino funds give them a say in local politics through supporting campaigns; the sister tribes without gaming are unable to afford such a large political presence. Many tribes are also able to keep their strong freedom and independence as a sovereign nation through both having these political powers and by buying back ancestral lands, and keeping control of how they make and spend their money. The Coushatta tribe is also able to use its casino funds and popular online presence to share its culture with more people. They run pow-wows that include competitions in cultural arts that come with cash prizes totaling over \$100,000. These competitions are only part of the effort towards rejuvenating a tribes culture, the Coushatta tribe runs a youth culture education center to help spread their cultural history. This cultural education center is one of the reasons why Coushattas's native language, Koasati, is the most well preserved native language today. Over 300 people still speak the Koasati language; there has

been almost no loss or degradation to the known language or alphabet, as exists in many tribes that are unable to keep their language alive. The casino also improves the lives of thousands of tribal and non-tribal members. Their casino alone offers over 3000 jobs, and their non-tribal businesses offer hundreds more. Funds for education have shown increased graduation rates, and the improving employment rate and tourist popularity has shown more local non-tribal members being able to sustain themselves and drop government aid.

My tribal focus on the Louisiana tribe of Coushatta Indians starts with the study on gaming policies and the tribes' political voice. The Coushatta tribe is one of two tribes in the state of Louisiana that have a casino, and a lot of policy and mandate issues in Louisiana base off of the fact that the Coushatta tribes have heavy competition. Louisiana actively represses gambling, and many mandates are being set into effect to try and restrict what the Louisiana tribes can do. Louisiana, despite its long running stance against gambling, has a lot of forms of gambling within its own state. A few of the competing gambling forms offered by the state are truck stop gambling, river boat gambling, and even online gambling is having a growing presence. Louisiana has a heavy moral stance against gambling, but they put a lot of effort into competing with the tribes, and pass a lot of mandates and policies to ensure that Louisiana can get some of the profits that the tribes are making. It is interesting how the states

morals can be temporarily suspended in order to keep money flowing into the states hands.

Throughout the years, Louisiana has grown much harsher on tribal gaming, passing no recent policies allowing tribal gaming and working on heavily competing against the tribes. The last gaming license that was given out was in 1974, and no more licenses have been handed since then. This shows that Louisiana has grown stricter in their policies, and shows that they are heavily against gambling; when it's not going into their own pockets. The state also stopped issuing riverboat gambling licenses in the 1990s, with only 14 legal licenses existing. But even though they aren't allowing new gaming boats, Louisiana is easing up on the laws and allowing the river boats a lot more freedom. Currently boats are allowed to dock on land and offer gaming, enabling them to act as a physical ground based casino. This also allows them to relocate, targeting Texan citizens by positioning the boats directly next to the border. This has caused a lot of controversy against Louisiana and its gaming board, but estimates show that docking close to the border has increased revenue by millions. Though Louisiana is heavily competing with the Coshatta tribe, this is not to imply that the Coshatta are doing anything wrong, such as mismanaging funds. The Coshatta tribe is under the effect of many Louisiana laws that dictate a high percentage of the casino profits must go back to the tribe. The tribe follows these mandates effectively, using funds

for tribal means such as pow-wows, tribal feasts, and education. Louisiana upheld a mandate they had in 2009, which now allows the tribe to use casino funds to help fund political means. The Coushatta tribe now dedicates large portions of money to try and influence politics to help them, and effectively lobbies to try and remove some of Louisiana's gaming areas. So a war is basically going on between the Coushatta's and Louisiana, both of them lobbying mandates and laws against the other to try and take a larger stake in the gaming market.

The Louisiana tribe is a unique tribe for many reasons, but they stand out as part of a small group of tribes that are allowed to contribute money to political campaigns. This power separates them from other tribes by giving them a voice in politics that relate to them, finally having a say in political agendas that effect their gaming, or ability for other parts of their government to function. Though the state is still heavily against gaming morally, different regimes are pushing gambling to be used as income for the state. Many Louisiana political activists are upset about the power that the Coushatta tribe has, but it is unlikely that they will be banned from supporting political means for a second time. The Coushatta tribe has much more power in their position now that they are allowed to influence politics, and it seems that they will continue to have an upper hand in gaming. The state also has bad public relations, as its gaming is seen by residents as immoral, and believe that

Louisiana is selling out their morals. And while Louisiana is seen badly by its citizens, people have no objections to gambling at a tribal casino where they know funds will benefit the tribal people. In short, The Coushatta tribe has an upper hand morally in a state where gambling is frowned upon. And since they now hold a strong hand in the political debates against Louisiana, they are one of the more powerful gaming entities in the United States. They have little competition, a moral high ground against the state, and now a firm position in forming their own political future. But they must be careful not to overplay their hand, as their current main benefit is as being viewed as 'worthy' by local people. If they continue to play a strong hand against the state, people may think the casino is impeding on the state's funds, and therefore against social services that Louisiana funds from casino funds, which goes primarily to education. It is easy to see how the Coushatta's could lose what they have worked for in any number of political windfalls, but at least in the past few years since the political floor has opened to them, they are definitely more secure in their upper hand on the gaming market.

The Louisiana tribe of Coushattas Resort is one of only three tribal casinos in Louisiana, and their web presence is very complete and detailed, seeming to try and be competitive against the popular riverboat casinos. They have separate websites for their casino and their tribe, and both are very modern websites with constant updates. They use their websites to plan pow-wows and events

year round, and their web presence is much more active and detailed than their two sister tribes. This shows how the Louisiana tribe translated their effort from being competitive with their casino website, into a tribal website that acts as an effective tool for tribal organization. The Louisiana tribe also has a website dedicated to their yearly pow-wow, it emphasizes that it is open to the public, showing how the internet has allowed their tribe to being even more accepting of visitors. (Tribal History). Their sister tribes do not have a comparable online presence, and they do not seem to use the internet as an event planning tool. The contrast between the two tribes shows that the Louisiana tribe benefits greatly from using the internet as a tribal planning tool, reflected by their constant events and articles. The casino draws thousands of people to their lands each year, exposing and teaching visitors to Coshatta culture. And their tribal website is their gateway to attracting visitors, and sharing tribal culture with them.

Interestingly, the sister tribes seem to be more focused on inner-tribe events, such as learning their native language and keeping their culture alive within their group. The internet is a tool for the Louisiana tribe, but their mission seems to be more to expose the world to Coshatta culture, to make a permanent mark by teaching others their values. Where the sister tribes seem to focus on keeping their values alive inside their closed groups, rather than exposing the world to it. So although the Coshatta tribe is finding financial

relief from gaming, and doing a lot of cultural outreach through their web presence; it can be argued that their true cultural practices and values have deteriorated in comparison to the closed off sister groups. Though both groups do yearly events such as their Pow-Wow, the Louisiana tribe has a large focus on tourism, using the Pow-Wow not only for cultural education, but as an amenity for guests at their lodge. Where the sister groups used their website as a glimpse into a still healthy and thriving Native American culture. This dissertation shows that websites can be a strong tool for extending culture, but also that tribes without a web-presence still manage to thrive and keep their culture extremely genuine. It may mean that when tribes shift more towards business and are able to use gaming as a resource, then they are not dependent on their older methods. Where their sister tribes still use many agriculture and natural means for income, the Louisiana tribe can rely on gaming, and are not required to rely on their ancestral trades; therefore it appears that their culture is declining. Though a contrast between these three tribes shows a relationship between web presence and cultural practices, a further study could be conducted on other tribes to see if having a casino effects how a tribe uses their web presence. It is possible that the Louisiana tribe excelled in their online tribal presence because they were compelled to advertise their culture along with their gaming business.

The Coushatta tribe runs one of only two tribal casinos in Louisiana, they have little competition because the state is heavily against gambling, ut a few state run riverboat casinos exist. Because of the lack of competition, the economic effects of the casino are much clearer as the data is ensured to be caused solely by the Coushatta tribe. The tribe is very active in promoting their culture, and the casino revenues fund many cultural events such as pow-wows, competitions of arts, and a museum. Their competitions are a main driving force in their continued cultural strength; many people practice their tribe's dances and arts to compete for cash prizes. These prizes come from casino revenues, and not only benefit tribal members with resources for education or daily needs, but also an environment to learn and practice about their tribal history. The casino also benefits non-tribal members with hundreds of jobs in their resort alone; their average wage is 24k a year, which is high for the area. This increased wage allows many works to increase their standard of living, a high percentage of workers who before needed government aid were able to go off of the aid after gaining employment. The tribe has a large presence in the local community as well; they own many businesses such as hotels and coffee shops in nearby towns. Their focus on managing their own resort has allowed them to branch out into local business, increasing career opportunities in popular hotel management careers for tribal members.

The casinos location plays a heavy factor in its economic influence. Louisiana is a strict state on gambling laws, and the only competition is another tribal casino, and a few riverboat casinos. Their neighboring state Texas has an even stricter policy on gambling, and thousands of tourists yearly cross the border into Louisiana solely to game at the Coshatta resort. Up to 53% of the traffic into the casinos is from out of state, and most of it comes from Texas.

Including the few riverboat casinos, Florida state takes in about \$177 million dollars per year from gaming taxes [. This increased traffic also provides an economic opportunity for local businesses; the Coshatta tribe takes advantage of this with their multitude of tribal managed businesses in local areas. One major argument against tribal casinos is an increase of crime in local areas, but instead crime has been decreasing as more funds can be put towards policing local communities. These opportunities benefit non-tribal locals as well; the Coshatta resort employs 2700 non-tribal employees, offering all a high competitive wage. These jobs allow many locals to increase their quality of living, many of them going off of government assistance. This increase in community revenue has acted as a boom on the local economy, housing being the fastest growing market. The Coshatta tribe also pushes many goodwill and community outreach efforts, using casino revenues for charitable donations. The tribe runs a yearly gold tournament, which acted as a fundraiser for the

Chairman's Cup Foundation, which uses funds to make charitable donations across southwest Louisiana.

The economy in this area of Louisiana has shown extremely large growth, and works as a powerful engine towards preserving culture, raising standards of living through employment, and creating more local opportunities through out of state traffic. Many of the argued negatives on the economy have the potential to be stabilized, such as crime and gambling addiction. And though some are affected adversely by these, the positive effect on the local community is evident and significant. Outreach by the tribe includes youth programs, cultural competitions, pow-wows, and other culturally enriching activities. The local economy has also been steadily increasing with traffic from out of state, the increase in career opportunities is increasing the lives of thousands of tribal and non-tribal employees at all of Coushattas businesses. In all, the Coushatta tribe has a positive effect on the local economy, and the casino allows both the tribe, and the community to benefit.

In conclusion, The Louisiana tribe of Coushattas have proven that tribal gaming can have many positive effects on the tribes cultural endurance, its presence and tourist attract ability, and improving the local communities and standards of living. The contrast when compared to the Coushattas two sister tribes is clear, gaming has given the Louisiana tribe economic freedom, political power, and a passageway into other sustainable practices to better

their tribe. Though not all tribal casinos have been as successful as the Coushattas have, the Coushatta tribe is an example that the system can work, that it is possible for gaming to benefit all parties involved. The Coushattas are also an example of a culture adapting to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and social technology. Their casino gives them a popular web presence, working as a gateway to their cultural events such as the pow-wows. The Coushattas are leaders into the reforming of tribal communities, their progress towards sustainability and sovereignty show that there may be a successful and equal future for Native Americans of all tribes.

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