

My wife and I have visited Prince William Sound on three previous occasions. Our fourth is scheduled for the summer of 2016. The main purpose of our visits are week-long sailing adventures within the sound on a small vessel operated by an Alaskan tour operator (Discovery Voyages). What draws us to PWS is the spectacular natural beauty and wildlife that we encounter there.

Our particular tour operator is not the only Alaskan that benefits from the tourist dollars that we leave behind. While in Alaska in general, and Whittier (or Cordova) in particular, we stay at hotels or lodges, dine at local restaurants, rent vehicles at car rental companies, buy the gasoline to fuel those vehicles, and purchase souvenir merchandise for our personal use— and as gifts for friends and family. The livelihood of many Alaskans depends on people like my wife and myself. Degrading the beauty and sense of wilderness that attracts us reduces our reason for coming and functions to the detriment of many local businesses.

The US Forest Service acts as the custodian for public lands not only for the citizens of today, but also for future generations to come. Once wild places have been developed, there is no going back. Multiple-use policies need to be self sustaining. Any excessive emphasis on extraction activities, such as logging and mining, diminishes the value of the resource to other user groups, both now and in the future. The consequences of an “exploit it now” mentality are clearly visible within the lower 48 states. US Forest Service officials in Alaska are still in a position to avoid making mistakes that were not perceived as mistakes except in hindsight.

While economic development is an important factor to consider in making public-policy decisions related to the PWS, it is certainly not the only critical variable that needs evaluation. Wild places have their own intrinsic value— both for environmental and psychological reasons. We humans represent a species that has been degrading and diminishing its habitat at an increasingly alarming rate. We persist in this behavior at our own current expense— and cheat our children and grandchildren of a quality of life to which they are entitled. That doesn't even take into consideration all the other species that share this planet with us. There is a moral imperative here that, if ignored, will reflect poorly on our generation into the historical future.

Unspoiled areas within the Chugach National Forest— along with the Nellie Juan and College Fjord Wilderness Study Areas— are magnificent vestiges of a natural world that is becoming more precious because of its increasing rarity. Twentieth Century public officials understood the value of these Alaskan lands and set them aside for future study and preservation. That they have become even more rare and valuable in the Twenty-first Century surely suggests the need for permanent wilderness and other protection status.

Your solicitation of citizen input into the policy-review process is very much appreciated.

Skip & Gayle Mitchell Stokes