

Chugach Forest Service Plan Revision #40816 Public Comment

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When I was a kid-45 years ago-I could look up at the Chugach hillside-lowercase h-and see maybe 4 or 5 lights. Frugal homesteaders lived in Army surplus Quonset huts or cabins scrounged from the surrounding forest. Now those who can afford it, light up the flanks of the Hillside-Capital H- in houses with vast expanses of glass to take advantage of a remarkable and expansive view that stretches north to Denali, the crown of the North American Continent, west to Susitna, the Sleeping Lady, and South to the active volcanoes of Cook Inlet.

So what do the rest of us, living closer to sea level, have to look at? The Chugach Mountains rising almost straight up out of glacial deposits leftover from vast rivers of ice. And if we've got even the humblest transport, we can drive along the skirts of the Chugach State Park on a scenic highway the equal of any in Europe. Sometimes, if we're very good, and very lucky, we can watch as a pod of gleaming white belugas porpoise up Turnagain Arm. At least before the mysterious loss of a great percentage of the population.

As a child I counted every waterfall, freshet, and trickle along the way to Hope where my dad did a little gold-panning in a small tributary to Resurrection Creek. Meanwhile we kids stalked each other through the woods or splashed in the water, throwing up sparkling sprays in laughing faces.

I still count the waterfalls whenever I beg, borrow, or steal a ride to Girdwood, and Portage, and, sometimes, even Whittier. Cars parked along the

road alert passers-by to the sight of mountain goats scrambling impossibly on what appear to be vertical cliffs overhung with intense greenery.

We are so fortunate to have the Chugach State Park and the Chugach National Forest and so many other wild places a short drive from half the state's population. Even those who are not into extreme sports, not hikers and windsurfers, rock and ice climbers, can enjoy as close to a wilderness as can be expected this close to "civilization". Fishing, photography, picnicking, unfranchised restaurants, flying up Alyeska's summer slopes in a glass-enclosed tram, and flying back down on winter skis and snowboards, or even panning for gold, are all options for recreation. There are places for snowmobiles, four-wheelers, boats, helicopters, and other motorized equipment. Tourism-based facilities and businesses ranging from luxury hotels and resorts, to maintained trails and campsites, to RV parks with and without hookups. Flight-seeing, kayak tours, bicycle roadtrips, fishing charters, air and boat taxi services. These all have their place as part of the multi-use policy of this five-million acre playground paradise.

There is another user group looking for a different experience, one which is closely tied to real wilderness. What are they looking for? Wilderness inherently means no sign of modern human use or habitation. Solitude, natural silence and sound, undamaged habitats and ecosystems, topography unchanged for millennia, complete and robust food chains. They look for that connection humans once had with what was wild, what was natural. Survival depended on knowledge of the natural world, the wisdom born of ancient experience, and the resilience born of self-reliance.

This group uses low or no-impact techniques to minimize any sign of having ever been on the land. No fire rings, no garbage, no encroaching clumps of

toilet paper, no chainsaws, no wheels. There are few places left that fill the need for wilderness. Most have fallen prey to out-of-control multi-use policies that have left trails and habitat damaged beyond repair by virtually unfettered motorized access and resource extraction. The fact that some uses are mutually exclusive has escaped the notice of many agencies and policy-makers.

If I am looking for solitude and silence, I don't go to the Knik River beaches, or Turnagain Pass, or Hatcher Pass, or pretty much anywhere along the Richardson Highway. Many wild and scenic rivers are infested with jetboats. I might go canoeing on the Swan Lake canoe trails, or hike Resurrection Trail, or float the Copper River. Oops, jetboats. But I can go to western Prince William Sound, to Nellie-Juan/College Fjord Wilderness Study Area, and have 2 million pristine acres of natural sound and silence. While my motorhead friends are having a good time thundering across their country-side, I can quietly kayak along cliffs and beaches for days, rarely seeing another human. I can eat berries and seaweed, catch a fish, take pictures or a nap, maybe listen to some Carlos Nakai Native American flute in the earbuds of my mp3 player-leaving silence for any companions.

I was shocked to find out that there are still State and National Forest and Wilderness areas that aren't permanently protected from development, resource extraction, and motorized destruction. This must change, or creeping encroachment will destroy the Quiet Wild Places that belong to the future. While Yellowstone, Yosemite, and other popular National Parks are "loved" to death, we must make sure that the Nellie-Juan/College Fjord WSA is protected and preserved as-is, or Alaska will be no different from the Lower 48. Our northern mystique is already under threat from Global Warming caused by reckless resource extractors, and the seduction of consumers into radical consumption, producing vast amounts

of industrial waste, all driven by the glorification of “The Bottom Line”, and the obsessive push towards unsustainable growth at all costs.

Well, if we don’t watch out, our future generations will curse us. Please think about that. There are plenty of places for those who thrive on speed and the roar of a snowmachine, or a four-wheeler, a Jet-ski, the drilling buzz of drones and chainsaws, the crack of firearms. Forgotten is the Right to Quiet, the Right to Wilderness, and the Right of the Wilderness to permanent protection. The Nellie-Juan/College Fjord Wilderness Study Area is helpless without the care and foresight of the United States Forest Service.

At a minimum it takes centuries to create traditional practices like subsistence. Traditional practices create cultures necessarily built on harmony with the environment, or they don’t last very long. Fifty or a hundred years does not make anything a traditional use, especially if it destroys that environment. In less than a century, replacing traditional farming practices with industrial food production has done no one any favors, except the chemical companies. In the same way, exchanging truly traditional subsistence practices for modern conveniences puts the Wilderness in peril of irreversible destruction. Once it’s gone, folks, it’s gone.

Please work for permanent protection with every bit of the dedication and influence that you can muster. As Concerned Citizens we will help.