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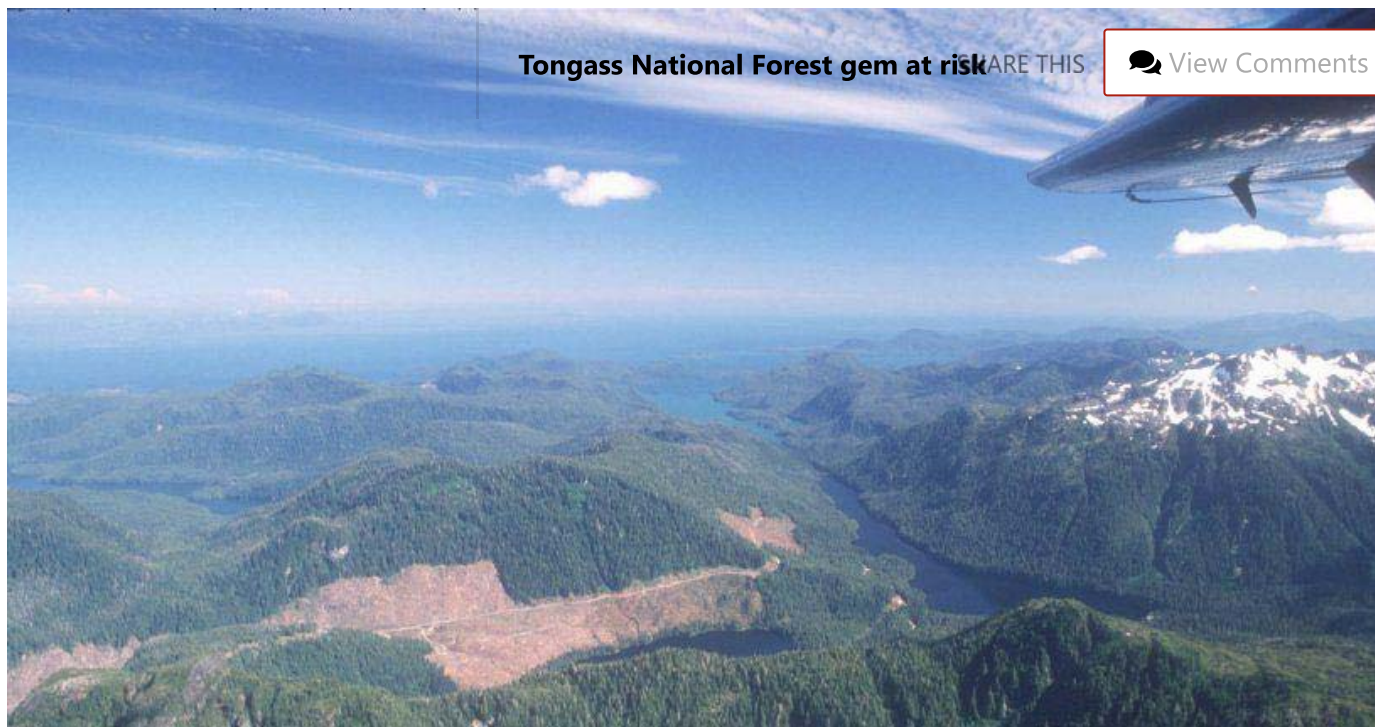
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Tongass National Forest gem at risk

DAN LEE Sep 22, 2019

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In July, my wife and I had the opportunity to see firsthand parts of the Tongass National Forest, the largest national forest in the United States. Located in Alaska's southeastern panhandle, it encompasses spectacular mountain peaks, numerous glaciers, a vast array of islands, and old-growth forests with towering trees that are more than twice as old as our country.

It is home to bald eagles (we saw several), brown bears, and many other species. Salmon return to its rivers and streams to spawn. Humpback whales (we saw several of them as well) spend their summers in the bays and inlets between the islands. Tongass is, in the judgment of many, the crown jewel of U.S. national forests.

The trees and other vegetation in the forest absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide, replacing it with the oxygen so essential to humankind and other air-breathing animals. And so, the forest is not just a thing of beauty. It is an important part of the ecosystems which sustain life.

Today the Tongass is at risk because timber companies that have supported the Trump administration would like to expand their logging operations in the forest.

The forest dates back to the time of Theodore Roosevelt, who, when he issued a proclamation preserving it as a national forest. A few years later, President Calvin Coolidge expanded it substantially.

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Unlike national parks, logging is not prohibited in national forests. It is, however, carefully managed by the U.S. Forest Service, when it is done the right way. And so in the course of the years, there has been a limited amount of logging in the Tongass forest, some of it selective logging that is conducive to maintaining the health of the forest, and some of it clearcutting that is very destructive.

Efforts have been made to preserve old-growth forests that are part of the Tongass forest. In the waning days of the Clinton administration, the service adopted the Roadless Area Conservation Rule to protect 58.5 million acres of pristine national forests and grasslands from most logging and road construction.

When George W. Bush became president, he modified these regulations to allow greater latitude and more state and local autonomy. However, on Sept. 20, 2006, U.S. Magistrate Judge Elizabeth Laporte ruled against the Bush administration, restoring the Clinton-era regulations.

Today, President Donald Trump, spurred on by Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy and others, is contemplating revisiting the no-road rule to open up greater portions of Tongass to logging. Whether that is a smart thing to do is a matter of heated controversy.

The timber industry, as one would expect, is all for it. Others have decimated the forest reserves and reservations.

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In an article by Bill Weir, CNN's chief climate correspondent, Art Bloom, a commercial salmon fisherman, expressed concern about the impact increased logging would have on the fishing industry.

He further noted, "People on cruise ships don't want to look at denuded hillsides." He added, "They come here because of what's still here. They wouldn't be coming here if it was a bunch of stumps."

According to statistics compiled by the Southeast Conference, a coalition of communities and businesses in the southeastern Alaska, fishing and tourism account for a quarter of southeastern Alaska's economy. In contrast, timber industries, they report, account for less than 1%, a total of 354 jobs in 2017.

Is it worth risking the well-being of the fishing and tourism sectors for something that will benefit a very small portion of those living in southeastern Alaska?

A FOOTNOTE: In 2009, the Obama administration approved clearcut logging on 381 acres in the remaining old growth forests of a Tongass forest roadless area. A federal district judge in Anchorage ruled against the Obama administration on this matter.

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