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TOPICAL

On Nature column: National forest threatened once again

Eliot Reed

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Because of the constant onslaught of the 24-hour news cycle, it is easy to miss stories about major policy changes concerning our national forests and wilderness areas throughout the United States. Recently the current administration ordered Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to open the world's largest temperate rainforest to logging.

The Tongass National Forest encompasses the extreme southeastern portion of Alaska, flanked to the east by the international border with British Columbia and to the west by the Gulf of Alaska. The Tongass is an archipelago consisting of fjords, glaciers and coastal mountain ranges. Totalling 16.7 million acres, it is slightly larger than the state of West Virginia.

The area is home to the Tsimshian, Haida and Tlingit people, deriving its name from the Tongass group of native Tlingit. Alaska's capital city Juneau is one of 31 communities in the region, which has a total combined population of 70,000 people.

The forested regions of the Tongass are predominantly Sitka spruce, western red cedar and western hemlock. The perhumid rainforest zone has a terrain ranging from porous limestone to impermeable granite sections.

The temperate forest and tundra ecosystems are home to a variety of wildlife. Five species of salmon populate the rivers of the Tongass. Black and brown (grizzly) bears, wolves, mountain goats and Sitka black-tailed deer are found in abundance. Bald eagles and ravens are common, while migratory birds such as the Arctic tern summer in the area. Additionally, the waters off the coast of the territory are teeming with life. Sea lions, seals, otters, humpback whales, orca and dolphins all dwell in the waters.

Like most areas rich in natural resources, the Tongass maintains a long and complex history dating back to the turn of the 20th century. President Theodore Roosevelt established the Alexander Archipelago Forest Reserve in the summer of 1902. Five years later, Roosevelt designated the Tongass National Forest. In 1925, President Calvin Coolidge expanded the Tongass.

Until 1950, logging typically occurred in low-lying coastal areas of the forest. After 1950, construction of two pulp mills began in the region, supporting aid efforts for Japanese recovery after World War II. Thus began nearly 70 years of controversy and legal battles.

In 2001, the Clinton administration established the Roadless Initiative, prohibiting the construction of new roads in roadless areas of national forests. In 2006, the Bush administration's appeal of the Roadless Rule was overturned, extending protections in the Tongass and elsewhere. In 2009, the Obama administration's approval of clearcutting old-growth timber was eventually halted by a court ruling.

Today the Tongass National Forest is being threatened once again, this time as huge areas of Amazonia and the Congo Basin are ablaze. For more than a century the Tongass narrowly escaped the devastation of clearcut logging. Hopefully, it will remain intact for centuries more to come.

Eliot Reed, an Anderson native, is the owner of Park Place Arts, a custom frame shop and art gallery in Anderson. He is a founding director of Heart of the River Coalition.



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