

Commentary: Northwest must speak for trees, salmon in Alaska

Keeping the Roadless Rule in force for the Tongass protects resources and climate we enjoy at home.

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By Tele Aadsen and Joel Brady-Power / *For The Herald*

We rise before dawn, our 43-foot salmon troller, the Nerka, nestled among rocks in one of our favorite Southeast Alaskan bays.

Pulling the anchor and puttering out to the fishing grounds, eyelids are still half-mast, minds precariously balanced between dreams and blurred reality from weeks of 18-hour days, hauling salmon aboard one fish at a time. We have shared these mornings every summer for the past 15 years and still they never cease to amaze. Darkness slowly relenting to light. Mist weaving mystery through old-growth forests clinging to rock right to the water's edge. The warbling songs of hermit and Swainson's thrushes rolling across still water. The subtle beauty of gray. The forest awakening.

This is the Tongass National Forest. Majestic scenes like this cover 80 percent of Southeast Alaska, the world's largest remaining temperate rainforest spanning 11,000 miles of coastline and 17 million acres of land. The Tongass nurtures a wondrous abundance of wildlife: bald eagles, deer, sea otters, humpback whales, and 30,000 bears. It's home to 73,000 people, including the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Alaskan Natives who've stewarded this land for thousands of years. Today, commercial fishing, tourism and recreation industries account for more than 25 percent of jobs in the region, directing approximately \$1 billion each into Southeast Alaska's annual economy. But the region's value can't be measured simply by livelihoods. Past and present, people's cultural traditions and ways of life rely on preserving this ecosystem.

People like us. We are both second-generation salmon fishermen, raised from childhood on these waters, among these trees. The Nerka is our home for four months of the year, as we troll our hooks through the deep, rich waters of the North Pacific. The rest of the year we make our home in Bellingham, self-marketing our catch to wild salmon-lovers in the Pacific Northwest and throughout the U.S. Like all Southeast Alaskans and many Washingtonians, our lives are inextricably bound to the Tongass.

If you've savored Alaskan coho, you've tasted the delicate rich heart of this forest. The Tongass includes about 5,000 salmon streams, roughly 17,000 miles of pristine, undammed creeks, rivers, and lakes that provide essential spawning and rearing conditions. The salmon that live and love and die here need these clean nutrient-rich waters to thrive. When they die they return the favor, offering up their spent bodies to fertilize a mosaic of western hemlock, Sitka spruce and western red cedar. The Tongass is, quite literally, America's Salmon Forest.

We're proud to participate in a sustainable fishery. We also know that responsible fisheries management alone won't preserve healthy salmon stocks. As Washington's depleted runs have shown, salmon require clean fresh water and healthy forests. Biologists have identified 77 key salmon-producing watersheds in the Tongass, habitat so critical as to necessitate extra protection. Thanks to 2001's Roadless Rule, federal law has safeguarded the last wild public lands in our National Forest system. In the Tongass, the Roadless Rule has ensured the conservation of over 9 million acres, protecting old-growth forests and salmon habitat from clear-cutting and the development of logging roads.

The state of Alaska has requested that the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture exempt the Tongass from the Roadless Rule. The Trump administration has since pressured the U.S. Forest Service for a full exemption, opening this rare and precious ecosystem to the largest old-growth logging project in recent history.

Ethical stewardship and environmental integrity aside, the economics of this proposal simply don't pencil out: the timber industry accounts for less than 1 percent of Southeast Alaska's economy; the costs of road-building and logging far exceed potential timber revenues and require millions of unsustainable taxpayer subsidies. Left intact, the Tongass is a buffer against climate change, a carbon sink storing 8 percent of the nation's annual global warming pollution. For salmon and humans alike, the long-term costs of clear-cutting 800-year old Sitka spruce aren't worth the paltry

short-term sales.

As lifelong fisher-folks, we have been front-line witnesses to climate change. It's easy to feel despair, then wonder what we can do to protect what we love. In this instance, what we can do is so very simple: We can speak for the trees. The [U.S. Forest Service is currently accepting public comment on the proposed exemption](#), open now through Dec. 17.

On our own, Southeast Alaskans and fisher-folks are a passionate, small group. You amplify this message: you who cherish the wild salmon on your family's table; you dreaming of a cruise up the Inside Passage; you who know the necessity of preserving the Tongass even if you never breathe the sweet cedar scent yourself.

The Tongass National Forest is public land and it is our shared responsibility to advocate for its well-being. A threat to the Roadless Rule in Alaska is a threat to Roadless Rules across the country, a dangerous precedent that may threaten other national forests, including those here in Washington.

Please email your comments to akroadlessrule@fs.fed.us by Dec. 17, urging the Forest Service to support the "No Action" alternative, continuing to safeguard the Tongass National Forest and all its inhabitants by preserving the Roadless Rule.

Tele Aadsen and Joel Brady-Power live in Bellingham and are co-owners of the F/V Nerka and Nerka Sea Frozen Salmon.

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