

January 27, 2022

Ketchikan Misty Fjords Ranger District is seeking input for future planning of the Ward Lake Recreation Area

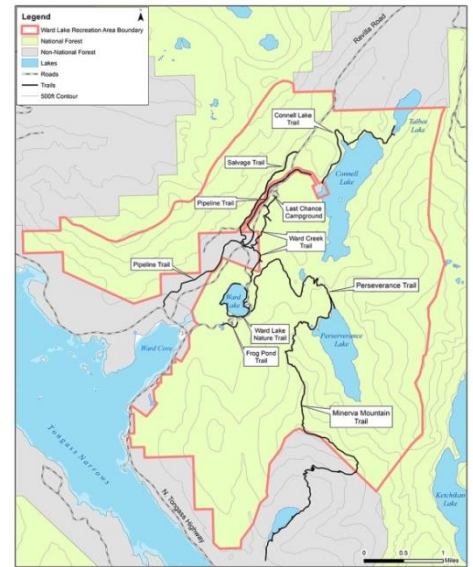
Statement written by Mary L. Stephenson
Resident of Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

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1.28.2022 UPDATED to add summary and couple of edit changes.

For Alaska - land is a valuable commodity and owned by several federal, state, local municipalities, native corporations, land trusts, private commercial endeavors and property citizens.

- Budgets to maintain public land comes from trusts, endowments, taxpayers, land usage and daily permits.
- Boundaries for trails begin at city and borough streets; or accessed by boat or float plane.
- Many, but not all, have recreation facilities, supervision, restrooms, waste management, and/or parking.
- State parks attract travelers in single use or groups arriving by private vehicle or tour bus of various sizes up to 52 passengers. Mountain Point Boat Launch parking lot and trail is overseen by Alaska Mental Health Land Trust. Herring Cove trail network departing from Wood and Powerhouse system are overseen by State of Alaska DOT with private commercial development on Wood 'east' side of Eagle River and residential homesteaders on Powerhouse 'west' side.
- Access to trail network and land use is seasonal with greater use in summer with influx of independent travelers, cruise passengers and crew. Year-around use is supported by residents.
- U.S. Forest Service Ketchikan Misty Fjords Ranger District is seeking input for future planning of the Ward Lake Recreation Area. An area primarily used for hiking, camping, outdoor sports including hunting, fishing and sustainable food source for native community.
- It is becoming increasingly clear, historically all entities within Ketchikan Misty Fjords Ranger District are lacking maintenance to trail network due to labor and budget constraints subsequently trails and facilities come with 'warnings' to users at own risk or closed altogether until repaired.
- Ward Cove Group with intent to build a hotel along with a private commercial partnership with Norwegian Cruise Lines located at the former pulp mill industrial site referred to The Mill have intentions to promote North Tongass region for shore excursion. Affirming the adage, if "they build it, they will come".
- Norwegian Cruise line is promoting water and land tours departing from The Mill and accepting walk-in travelers who reserved ticket and used NCL shuttle from downtown Discovery Center. For 2022 a cruise ship is scheduled in port every day except Monday.



NCL Tour Schedule: 1-2 per day in each of these 4 tours. TOURS: 1) **Connell Lake: Kayaking up to 24 people;** 2) **Connell Lake: Sea cycling up to 10 people;** 3) **Pipeline Trail: E-bikes and Walk up to 12 people;** 4) **Talbot Lake: Hiking up to 12 people;** The last 2.5 hour E-bike tour departs at 4:00PM; all tours end at a public campsite to socialize, snacks and restrooms. A NCL guide will accompany all groups.

>>>> **Ward Cove Pier* has 2 Berths. Above schedule is for Berth 1. When Berth 2 docks 2nd ship on same day, tours into Ranger District will increase as with population interest to trail network as independent traveler.**
*Pier takes the title of 'Longest Pier built in the United States'; capable of handling megaships of 5,000 passengers plus crew.

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- Speculating this becomes a popular District to experience the wilderness trails, guidelines and restrictions must apply to general public, residents and City Dock cruise lines offering similar tours for guests.
- QUESTION: Can independent traveler or resident seeking same experience use the same trail, lakes and campsite facility if they own E-bike, sea cycle, or kayak and/or are rented from independent tour operator at Ward Cove retail location or transport in from secondary location? What portion of Tongass Highway are E-bikes permitted to traverse? All these points should be addressed in Memorandum of Understanding.
- Cape Fox Corporation partnering with City of Saxman have proposed a similar development with hotel, expansion of Totem Park, clan house, carving center, parking and seaport with one dock and two berths.
- **South Tongass Highway have similar problematic economic development issues.** Private endeavor by Ketchikan business owners acquired Herring Bay Lumber Company which closed in early 1970s. Owners cleaned up the contaminated soil left behind by lumber company giving Eagle Creek, referenced by Len Laurance, a new lease on life for salmon, sea mammals, variety of birds and black bears in the temperate rainforest with its own eco-system. Currently it is the No. 1 destination for wildlife and salmon.

Developing the 40-acre preserve, Alaska Rainforest-Wildlife Sanctuary (ARWS) secured land from Alaska Mental Health Land Trust, wetlands from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (under the authority of several Federal laws), and homesteaders property with egress from Tongass Hwy onto Wood Road. Permits issued by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Department of Environmental Conservation and lobbying efforts by state and federal legislators.

Sanctuary offers an all-inclusive private walking trail and boardwalk, zipline, raptor and totem carving centers, history of timber in southeast Alaska museum, gift store, and refreshments with the price of a ticket. Shore excursion tickets are sold onboard at cruise concierge desk, sanctuary booth at visitor center and online. To maintain control of large groups, sanctuary guides provide guided tour on trail-boardwalk back to center. No public access to boardwalk without a ticket which starts at \$85 upwards to \$150.

Motorcoach is offered for groups, 15-passenger vans for independent travelers purchasing tickets at visitor center; local residents offered option to use company van or private vehicle for transportation. Property offers significant parking, restrooms and housing for seasonal staff. Cruise package offers an all-day experience*: George Inlet Lodge for crab feast, Sanctuary for wildlife and Alaska Lumberjack show.

Like the Ranger District North Tongass with public space without a revenue stream, **Powerhouse (dirt) Road offers access to 'west' side of Eagle Creek** co-mingle with SSRAA Whitman Lake Fish Hatchery, homesteaders' property, and tour parking (fee for usage) on private property. Ketchikan Gateway Borough 2017 traffic-pedestrian survey indicated over 55,000 visitors arriving in 5,000 vehicles used Powerhouse Road and DOT Herring Cove Bridge for viewing wildlife. Public area lacks parking, restrooms and boardwalk safety has not been addressed by Gateway Borough. Not privy to ARWS head count*, one can estimate 'east' side attendance equaled that of 'west' side.

Tracking Borough economic development revenues for Herring Cove produces a lucrative revenue stream from ARWS in taxes and private property owners collecting usage fee for parking. An expense is incurred by State DOT maintenance and Borough CPV funds for Ambassadors. Gateway Borough hesitates to transfer title of roads citing lack of road powers and would have to establish a Service Area for neighborhood.

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- **Existing Usage Fees.** Alaska Mental Health Land Trust, U.S. Bureau Land Management and State of Alaska Parks all begin with application approval, annual fee (up to \$3,000) whether used daily or seasonal, and/or per usage fee (\$5 per person). After collecting fees - none of the agencies have a reservation system like national parks: Yosemite, Yellowstone, etc. which monitors daily use and/or limits.
- In a 2021, city council heard residents complain of guided hiking tours. BLM collects \$3,000 annual fee for land use on Carlanna Lake trail. Resolution: two tour operators were set a limit of two hiking tours per day; one per tour operator with no more than eight paying customers. The honor system monitors use/abuse reported by residential use. NCL far exceeds this limit in group size – note above when addressed.
- **Reservation System and Price Package** In my opinion, the community needs to plan long term with Ward Cove, Saxman and City docks generating interest in public land use for private endeavors. A reservation system should be implemented. When and if annual fees or head count is calculated, the reservation system is paid for from collection and balance is divided three ways: Land jurisdiction, Maintenance Fund, City or Borough oversight. Designate who is responsible for trail maintenance and repairs done within two fiscal cycles.
- Guidelines and reservation system track group usage, limits and enforcement. Size of group, number of trips per day, description of tours (hiking, fishing, kayaking) is granted to one business applicant (if multiple, a fee per category). Head count 'not paid' if tour was cancelled.
- For example, Adventure Karts Expedition, LLC, Alaska Canopy Adventures, Kawanti Adventures and Taquan Air are owned by the same individuals/partnership and offer similar tours that would qualify for permit. Affiliated with cruise brands selling shore excursions – it should be with caution when setting criteria for land use permits similar to third-party products that garner additional tour departures in Ranger District.
- Residents must retain a 'free pass' with usage guidelines to all trails and protect designated trails 'off limits' to tour groups, as done with Refuge Cove, Settler's Cove and Mountain Point.
- New trend for tour operators electric bikes (E-bikes) rentals individuals without guide or group led with a guide. Departure from downtown into the borough or from Ward Cove The Mill into Ranger District is just one of many areas to explore. E-bikes are equipped with light dirt/concrete or off-road dirt tires and reportedly make light noise and operate with Lithium-ion battery. Whoever is renting or for personal use E-bikes in the District, regulations must be set for enforcement; noise abatement and road hazards: black bears chasing bicyclist.
- Ward Lake, trail, campsite, public facilities and restrooms will become even more popular as a new World War II Historic Site exhibit is being planned. When Ward Cove hotel is completed, expect NCL tours added for concierge desk to sell. Regulations should extend into the long summer evenings as well.
- Now more than ever North Tongass Highway 7 will become an exit ramp for destinations not yet declared by Ward Cove Group, Norwegian Cruise Lines and City of Saxman to the south. Private enterprise lobbying that effects change within eco-system becomes an economic driver for local governments. Although it may require application and permit approved by council, assembly, board or commission – when presented in a piece-meal fashion and granted, overall – it will create havoc to residents and future residential development or loss of residential property values – without a Strategy Plan.

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World-wide, seaports are having a discussion on 'Overtourism' defined as **“the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived; quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors; experiences in a negative way”**.

- Leadership and the community's stakeholders have not yet addressed overtourism with the Port of Ketchikan, Ward Cove or Saxman. Dynamics will change as passenger counts will soar well over 2million by Year 2032. Air, land and sea wilderness attractions will max out beyond limits matching the greed that ultimate depletes our Number #1 asset our mental health and community lifestyle as we know it today.

U.S. Forest Service Ketchikan Misty Fjords Ranger District, citizens of Revillagigedo Island, and travel industry must start this broader conversation starting with the January 27th meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary L. Stephenson

Employed in Tourism since 1982
Resident of Ketchikan since 2014

Summary – the 20-year update for the US Forest Service Misty Fjord Ranger District earmarked a new millennium and before it, 1970s as cruise ship brands were marking THEIR territory i.e. Southeast Alaska. The land ownership hasn't changed much; it remains a chess game... someone is always King while the rest are Pawns 'paying heavily' for the right (independent tour operators) to participate and/or residents unable to afford to pay for the infrastructure used by others.

MF Ranger District has a simple task: layout 20-year plan for wilderness usage in an urban setting. I suspect in this arena of politics the federal government will yield as moderator to municipalities and commercial endeavors play out usage in executive sessions or behind closed doors based of preferential or concessions lucrative offers regardless where cruise brand flags fly in loyalty and integrity. Let the land-grab begin!

My position paper is clearly asking for a Reservation System set up to monitor the influx of individuals using public lands (trails, lakes, campsites, recreational areas, boat launches) something US Forest Service and Department of Agriculture might be familiar with. Who designs, who implements, who financially supports the system – is in your / our range of discussion.

A system must be approved and set up by Season 2023 so that pandemic recovery back to a new normal – can prepare for 1.4M cruise passengers plus 100K independent travelers.

Thank you. MLS