

Tongass Planning Comment February 21, 2025

This Tongass National Forest Planning comment letter is authored by an indigenous Haida person who was born in, raised in, and has lived their life of nearly 60 years in, the Tongass. They intend to remain forever.

They were raised on Prince of Wales Island, with migration patterns ranging South to the Canadian border and North to Haines. They grew up trapping, logging, and fishing. They spent 20 years of adulthood working in the timber industry. Their logging experience was vast, working in all areas of the industry.

Being born Haida, raised Haida, having raised their own children Haida, and now teaching grandchildren Haida ways, describes this author. If you, the reader are Haida then you understand. If you are not Haida, but have lived in the Tongass your whole life and intend to remain indefinitely, you may understand. If you are a visitor with no intent to remain indefinitely, it may not be possible for you to understand. Nonetheless this author attempts to communicate to all audiences in this letter.

### **What is the Tongass National Forest...**

The Tongass can be described in many ways, and often it means something different depending on the individual's composition, background, etcetera. It is a unique and complex environment which is often quite simply referred to as **home** by those who intend to remain forever within it. In the case of the Tongass, this simple sounding reference, "home", is much more complex than any description ever written about it. To many Americans a home may mean a space within four walls or a city block. To a person of the Tongass, their home is a vast territory.

For more than a century, science has sought to unravel the "mysteries" of human occupation in the region. All the evidence suggests that people have been here since the glaciers receded enough to expose the land. Incidentally this is what the indigenous oral record has always said. Indigenous people have always been on this land.

The people were here before the trees. The forest grew up with an indigenous population of humans as an integral part, in a symbiotic relationship with all the other elements of the forest. Thousands of years passed as this complex forest culture developed. The human part of the forest developed into one of the most sophisticated civilizations on earth.

The above paragraph attempts to help the nonindigenous reader to understand that while they may have been taught, and therefore have an assumption, that a forest is devoid of permanent human cultures, that is certainly **not** the case in the Tongass.

As European culture arrived in the area, change began to occur rapidly. It had devastating effects on the entire forest (remember, the people are a part of the forest). People, trees, salmon, (just to name a few critical forest elements) died by the thousands, ten thousands, millions, etc. These forest elements had never before perished in such large numbers, it was devastating.

**Now it is the year 2025 and the Tongass National Forest Land Management Plan Revision is taking place. What should we do:**

We should accept that there are still indigenous people in the Tongass and they are critically important to it.

We should recognize that there are also now nonindigenous people living in the Tongass who plan to spend their entire lives here.

We should notice that these two groups often have many things in common, and that it isn't often enough noticed. One of the biggest commonalities is that **both groups intend to remain in the Tongass forever**. Hereafter, these people will be referred to as "Tongassans" for ease of reference.

There is another, significant group, which is composed of visitors. Visitors have no intention of remaining forever in the Tongass. In instances where they have control in the Tongass, they tend to be detrimental to the Tongassans.

Generally speaking, Tongassans love their home, the Tongass National Forest, they are a part of it. They intend to remain indefinitely and want a good future for their children, grandchildren, friends, neighbors, etcetera. Tongassans tend to respect the other elements of the forest, they feel that they are a part of it. They are inclined to maintain a healthy sustainable forest. They strive for proper management of the forest. They have a tendency to cooperate in the best interest of the forest. If we are looking at it from a more Euro-American perspective, we might say it is their forest, the Tongassans'.

The Tongassans are the ones who suffer the consequences when devastating things happen in the forest. They feel the effects.

Without an intact forest the Tongassans risk losing their right to **Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness**. These rights, which were declared by the government of the United States of America in the Declaration of Independence, must be upheld by the same government that created them. Liberty is also protected in the Constitution of the United States of America, in the very first sentence.

All Tongassans are citizens of the United States of America. The indigenous tribes of the Tongass National Forest are recognized as sovereign entities by the federal government. The tribal citizens are recognized by the federal government as both US citizens and tribal citizens. Having the right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness means the Tongassans have the right to control the stewardship of their own home, the Tongass.

Keep in mind that Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, these unalienable rights, are largely about the right to an environment that facilitates happiness. Our laws and regulations should reflect these rights.

To destroy the home of the Tongassans is to destroy their rights. To protect their home from destruction and facilitate a healthy forest is to uphold those rights.

Visitors, or people haven't even visited are not qualified to manage the Tongass. People in Washington DC are not an exception.

The greatest understanding of best Tongass management practices comes from collective intergenerational learning.

Generally speaking, visitors have no intention of remaining. They have a tendency to be destructive to the resources of the Tongass. The future of the forest is not of great consequence to them. This is not to say visitors shouldn't come to the Tongass, it is to say that they need some solid guidelines put in place by the Tongassans.

It is important to state here that there are exceptions to the above mentioned tendencies, in each group. There may readers of this letter that would seek to point out negative exceptions that appear in individual cases and focus on them. Those readers may be attempting to discredit valid points by using that technique. It is understood by this author that exceptions exist across humanity, and it is my hope that is understood by Tongass National Forest planners as well.

There is a very small, yet significant subgroup, within the visitors group, who visit with a high level of respect, they are a positive type of exception worth mentioning.

Economically speaking, Tongassans tend to keep more of their money in the Tongass, which is economically stabilizing. Visitors tend to spend their money in commerce streams that take their money out of the Tongass, which has more of a destabilizing effect. As time goes by, even the fishing industry has become more and more owned by visitors.

Businesses operating within the Tongass should be owned by Tongassans. If there are exceptions, those visitor owned businesses should pay the Tongassans an appropriate rent for passage through our home. They should follow the guidelines set forth by the Tongassans.

Tongassans wish to protect a unique way of life, a culture of forest symbiosis. This symbiotic forest culture is not to be confused with glamorized media illustrations of "harmony". The true Tongassan endures hardship in ways that exist nowhere else in the United States of America. They accept these hardships and work hard to make a best possible future. They respect the forest in its entirety, and consider the effects of their actions, all in pursuit of a better future. They tend to live by values that have been developed over millennia in the local indigenous cultures.

When European culture came across the oceans under the pretense of the Doctrine of Discovery, it was destructive to all cultures in its path. Under the pretense of Manifest Destiny the destruction continued across the continent from East to West. The Tongass was overwhelmed by the arrival of the European culture by ship, from Russia, Spain, and England, followed by overland arrivals in the westward movement of the United States.

Thankfully, the United States of America has laws in place to protect the culture of animals, such as Orcas. It is equally important to protect and perpetuate the indigenous human cultures of the Tongass, as well as the culture of the overall group of Tongassans. It is to the detriment of the entire country, and the world, to cause more cultural destruction in the Tongass, to risk losing the culture entirely.

The Indigenous Draft Assessment is by far the best of the documents presented by the USFS so far. It did lack terribly though on a very important aspect of indigenous culture, **sharing**. There is a minimally significant mentioning of it on page 38. This author is Haida and knows first hand how significant sharing is in the culture. The phenomenon goes back thousands of years and may be most well known as it pertains to potlatch events. Potlaches weren't very well explained in the document, though there is some minimal explanation.

Overall, in the Haida culture, the practice of sharing is even greater outside of potlatch events. In everyday life the Haida are sharing resources back and forth. Sharing spans most resources, but natural food resources are by far the most common. Ultimately this practice of sharing has a stabilizing effect on food security, economics, health, and overall well-being of our communities. In order for this sharing to occur we need healthy forest resources.

It has long been recognized that for indigenous peoples of the Tongass, they are at their most healthy when they practice the ways of their ancestors. It also appears that those same practices may in fact have a very similar effect on all people who intend to remain in the Tongass indefinitely. **Cultural practices generate health in Tongass communities.**

**All things are connected.** This is not talked about enough, if at all, in the assessment. It should be clearly stated and explained. It is well known in Haida culture, as it is within many old cultures around the world, that all things are connected. The field of science appears to be gaining an understanding of that fact as time goes by. We cannot separate the Tongassans from the forest, as we cannot separate the trees, fish, birds, berries, bears, wolves, or any other forest element without consequences.

When it is understood that all things are connected, then it also becomes evident that all things are important. When we, the people, steward our environment in a manner that considers everything in the forest to be important, **considering everything with respect**, then we set ourselves up for Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

All elements of the Tongass are important, all things are connected, some directly and some indirectly. The human element of the forest is very likely directly connected to thousands of other forest elements. For many people, trees, fish, or the beauty of it all, might immediately come to mind. In this letter the author chooses to talk specifically about **red cedar** trees. Among the many reasons for this choice are the extensive interaction between humans and red cedar in the Tongass, as well as the incredibly long regeneration time.

It is important to understand that sustainability exists only if the rate of regeneration is equal to or greater than the rate of use. Furthermore, in order to have **healthy sustainability**, the rate of use must be low enough, as compared to the rate of regeneration, that there is a suitable margin of safety.

It is important also to clarify that in order to have sustainable forestry, the regenerated forest must grow up to be the same as the one that it is replacing. Sustainable forestry existed in the Tongass up until about the mid 1900s when the pulp market was up. Out of that era came a practice of thinking of forestry as simply growing trees as fast as possible in order to generate wood fiber volume for pulp. That practice failed to regenerate forests of the previous quality, they are mostly just landscapes covered with low quality trees, and devoid of other life forms.

Indigenous people have been using red cedar as long as it has existed in the Tongass. Canoes, totem poles, houses, clothing, containers, utensils, ceremonial items, are just a few of the things used, both historically and presently.

Canoes, a foundational element of Haida culture, are made from red cedar trees which are generally 400 to 600 years old and older. They are made of very high quality trees having very little defect. They are very rot resistant, have few knots, cracks, twist, or rot. Their growth rings are very close together creating strong and highly rot resistant wood. There is no known way to speed up the process of growing these trees and maintaining their quality, they have to grow slowly for 400 years or more. Forest management planning needs to account for this.

Current active forest management practices on logged areas take the opposite approach, speeding up growth, generally by thinning. Thinning makes the trees grow faster, and with more limbs. This results in trees with more taper, more knots, larger growth rings, and far less rot resistance. These trees are also much weaker in comparison, they are very low quality. Even in logged areas where a more of passive management occurs, and there is no thinning, those trees usually still don't have the quality of old growth.

There were special conditions that allowed the old growth to grow the way it did. Now we need to figure out how to manage in a way that creates the conditions necessary to grow old growth quality red cedar and other trees, for the future.

It is **imperative** that our new forest management plan has:

We **must have ongoing studies** to figure out the best management practices for growing old growth quality red cedar, and other trees.

We **must inventory** the high-quality old growth red cedar so we know how much currently exists.

We **must regulate the use of the high quality old growth red cedar, so that only Tongassans may harvest and use it, with a priority on indigenous use.** No selling it outside the forest.

**We must regulate the harvest of high quality old growth red cedar to a rate of healthy sustainability.** Keep in mind that this means that the existing high quality old growth red cedar has to last, nominally, for 400 years, because it will take at least that long to grow more of that same quality. For those who would attempt to discredit... the author recognizes that there are seedlings in the forest today that will have grown up naturally to meet the quality criteria 400 years from now, which will be a factor. In studies that occur as a result of a quality management plan, these details can be refined. There is also the fact that we have not yet studied and determined the best method of management for growing these trees. There are no doubt many other factors as well, but we have enough accuracy here to illustrate the point.

**We must encourage relationship building activities between the USFS and the tribes.**

**We must encourage long-term employment for Forest Service workers within the Tongass.** Affectively encouraging them to becoming Tongassans.

**We must always use respect and long-term planning.**

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litl Tongassaa uu ijang



