

DSC and the Future of

THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

BY DAVID OAKES



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Juneau – the only state capital you cannot reach by driving. Having begun our trip from Juneau by air, we returned by boat. We were all sorry the trip was so short!



For the past few years, I have had the honor of representing Dallas Safari Club at the Alaska Professional Hunters Association annual convention in Anchorage, Alaska. It is a great opportunity to network with some of our exhibitors and learn about issues affecting the livelihoods of hunting guides in the Last Frontier.

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Conservation Force

- Dallas Safari Club
- Kenai Peninsula Chapter of Safari Club International
 - Wildlife Forever
 - The Wildlife Society

Document of Findings and Recommendations on the Tongass National Forest

Whereas the Tongass National Forest is the largest national forest in the United States – established by the great conservationist President Theodore Roosevelt to be managed for the benefit of the American public; and

Whereas the Tongass represents a critical component of the most important remaining temperate rainforest on earth; and

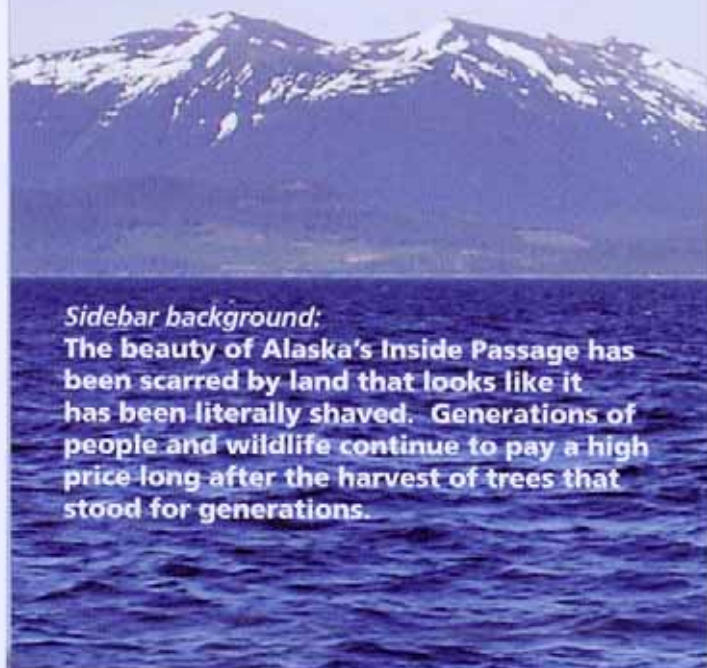
Whereas the ecological values of old-growth forests require centuries to develop; and

Whereas past forest management in Southeast Alaska, dating back over 50 years and which focused heavily on timber production and associated road building, has significantly impacted the region's landscape; and

Whereas conservation of temperate rainforest fish and wildlife requires reducing habitat fragmentation by clear cuts and roads, avoiding harvest in vulnerable areas such as high volume old-growth stands and riparian zones, and restoring natural structural complexity to sites previously altered by timber harvest activities; and

Whereas planning at the landscape level is needed to address ecological concerns such as fish and wildlife habitat, water flows, and forest fragmentation; and

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Sidebar background:

The beauty of Alaska's Inside Passage has been scarred by land that looks like it has been literally shaved. Generations of people and wildlife continue to pay a high price long after the harvest of trees that stood for generations.

Two years ago, Jimmie Rosenbruch, Sr. invited me to his table for the APHA evening banquet and auction. As the owner of Glacier Guides, Inc., Jimmie has taken hundreds of people hunting and fishing in Southeast Alaska over the last 40+ years, and is a Weatherby Hunting & Conservation Award winner. Scott Hed, Director of the Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska, was also Jimmie's guest that evening. Conversation at the table soon centered on our shared dedication to conserving Alaska's wildlife and habitat.

Scott has coordinated hunting and wildlife management conservation groups to lobby the U.S. Forest Service and Congress on their management of our nation's largest national forest – the Tongass, in Southeast Alaska – and the resulting impact on hunting and fishing. Scott and Doug Grann, President of Wildlife Forever (the conservation affiliate of the North American Hunting Club and the North American Fishing Club, whose combined membership exceeds 1,300,000) decided to put together a field trip to Southeast Alaska for representatives of some of the nation's largest and most prestigious hunting conservation groups. They recognized Jimmie Rosenbruch would be the ideal host for such a trip. Few people know the Tongass like Jimmie and his family due to their decades of personal experience on the ground and on the water.

By the time we were enjoying dessert, Jimmie was thrilled to have the opportunity to help educate and

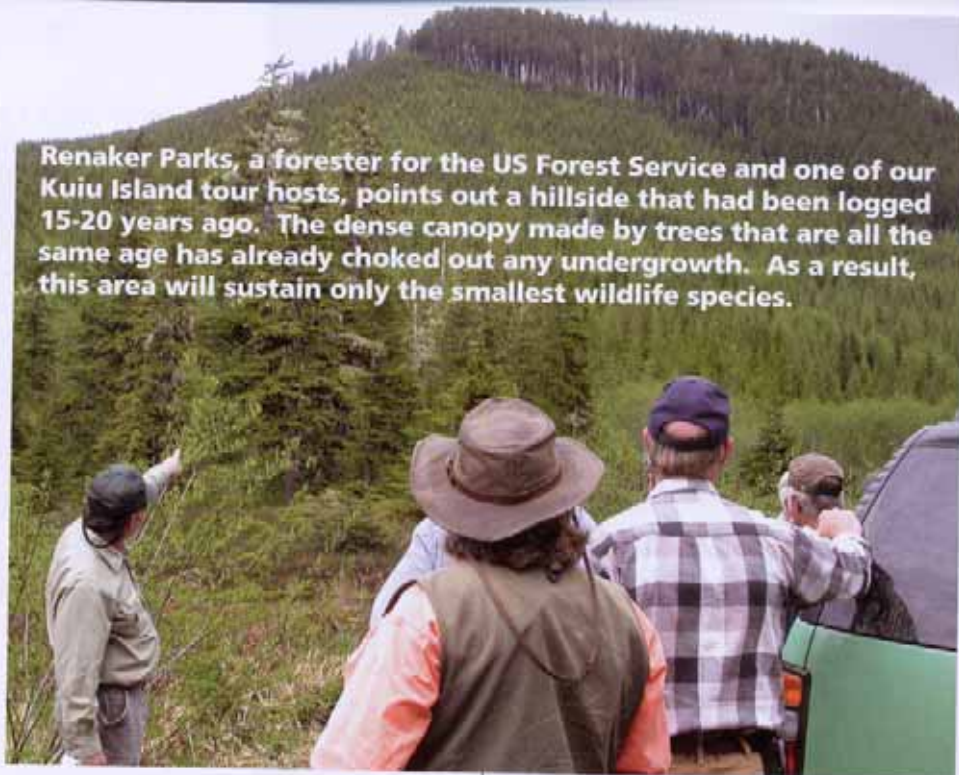


Kuiu Island Tour Group, led by the US Forest Service representatives

Standing, left to right: Jimmie Rosenbruch (Glacier Guides), Doug Larsen (ADF&G), Jeff Gronauer (Campfire Club of America), Patricia O'Connor (USFS), Mike Hamrick (SCI), Scott Hed (Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska), Tom Franklin (Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership), Len Vallender (Boone & Crockett), Scott Snelson (USFS), Chris Savage (USFS), Jim Teer (Conservation Force), Richard Lowell (ADF&G), Jay Bellinger (Wildlife Forever). *Seated/Kneeling, left to right:* Renaker Parks (USFS), Kim Titus (ADF&G), Doug Grann (Wildlife Forever), David Oakes (DSC)

engage others in conservation of the Tongass, and he proposed a trip for June, 2007 at the end of spring bear hunting season.

Itineraries were reviewed and revised, participation was solicited and gained from the U.S. Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and invitations were extended to a select number of hunting conservation groups. Dallas Safari Club received an invitation, and I was thrilled when Gray Thornton recommended that I represent DSC on the Tongass trip. In addition to Scott and Doug, I was joined by representatives of Conservation Force, Boone & Crockett Club, Safari Club International, Camp Fire Club of America, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and the Wildlife Society (the organization of wildlife management professionals). Our hosts would be Jimmie and his wife MaryAnn (both registered Alaska Master Guides), his daughter Alisha Rosenbruch-Decker (registered Alaska Guide)



Renaker Parks, a forester for the US Forest Service and one of our Kuiu Island tour hosts, points out a hillside that had been logged 15-20 years ago. The dense canopy made by trees that are all the same age has already choked out any undergrowth. As a result, this area will sustain only the smallest wildlife species.

and son-in-law Zach Decker (registered Alaska Assistant Guide) on Glacier Guides' luxurious vessel, the *Alaskan Grandeur*.

We met in Juneau, the only state capital that is accessible only by sea or air. Juneau is a striking beauty, cloaked in trees

clinging to steep hillsides that rise abruptly from the water. The meeting began with a presentation by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game on the various wildlife species found in the Tongass. The U.S. Forest Service

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CONSERVATION SIDEBAR, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 74

- Whereas despite natural disturbance and successional change, forest reserves are much more likely to sustain the full biological diversity of forests than lands managed primarily for timber production; and
- Whereas protection of water quality and yield and prevention of flooding and landslides require greater attention to the impacts of roads and recognition of the value of undisturbed buffer zones along streams and rivers; and
- Whereas large contiguous or connected habitat areas containing essential habitats are essential to supporting sustainable populations of wildlife and fish; and
- Whereas hunters and anglers visit Southeast Alaska in growing numbers every year to experience outdoor recreation opportunities that support a growing number of jobs for service providers; and
- Whereas the Tongass is home to over 40 species of mammals including huntable populations of black and brown bear, Sitka black-tailed deer, wolf, and mountain goat; and
- Whereas the rivers and streams of the Tongass host the largest returns of wild salmon on any federal conservation system unit and are responsible for spawning and rearing millions of fish that support the commercial and sport fishing industries; and
- Whereas the habitat conditions in old-growth areas, particularly in low elevation and beach areas, are extremely valuable to species such as Sitka black-tailed deer, and brown and black bear; and
- Whereas the harvest of timber from Southeast Alaska has occurred at a disproportionate rate in the most valuable low-elevation stands of old growth relative to its scarcity on the forest; and
- Whereas timber harvest from non-Tongass private lands in Southeast Alaska has removed further valuable habitat from the overall land base; and
- Whereas the Tongass provides many benefits and services in addition to the capacity for timber production from the forest, including but not limited to clean water, sustainable populations of fish and wildlife, and an attractant for a growing number of hunters, anglers, and other tourists; and

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followed with a presentation on management planning for multiple-use on the Tongass. Finally, Trout Unlimited's Alaska staff spoke about a joint project by the Nature Conservancy and Alaska Audubon. This project involves very detailed study and mapping of every watershed on the Tongass, with particular attention paid to bear summer habitat, deer winter habitat, marbled murrelet nesting habitat, riparian and upland large-tree forests, salmon spawning and rearing habitat, and coastal estuaries. The basic premise of the project is to study the Tongass in its entirety, by analytically assessing the values of individual watersheds. It has much value for future discussions on management of the Tongass. As the first half-day of our encounter concluded, we were all impressed with the quality of education we had received, the heterogeneity of our group with our shared commitment to the Tongass, and the tremendous diversity of backgrounds and agendas among our presenters and hosts. It was clear that all participants on several sides of a large table were very keen on the outcome of our field trip!

Our journey began as we boarded a float plane for a 90-minute flight to meet the *Alaskan Grandeur*, anchored in Rowan Bay on Kuiu Island.

The best way to experience the expansiveness of a place is to see it from the air. The Tongass is nearly 17 million acres in size and accounts for the vast majority of land in Southeast Alaska – a place many refer to as the “Inside Passage” due to its protected waterway plied by scores of cruise ships. The Tongass has some 14,500 miles of shoreline and 128 glaciers. It is home to all five species of Pacific salmon, brown and black bear, Sitka black-tailed deer, mountain goat, wolves, and more. There are 32 communities scattered throughout the Southeast Alaska, home to roughly 70,000 people.



When old-growth forests are clear-cut, the new growth that returns is all the same age. As it grows, the trees form a canopy that keeps the forest floor so dark it will not sustain significant plant life or wildlife.



Our float plane has deposited the group on the dock at Rowan Bay, Kuiu Island. Jimmie Rosenbruch's boat, the *Alaskan Grandeur*, will be our home for the rest of the trip.

The Tongass National Forest was created in 1907 by President Theodore Roosevelt, and its management has long been a challenging affair. The timber industry once ruled this region, but times have changed. The U.S. Forest Service updates its management plan for the Tongass every decade or so, and with the wealth of resources found in the region, it is not difficult to imagine that the Forest Service cannot please everyone all of the time. (In fact, some, even within the Forest Service, would say it has not pleased anyone any of the time!) The dispute between logging and conservation interests has a long history in Southeast Alaska. We wanted to absorb at least a bit of what this extraordinary place is all about and make some proposals that would advance a multiple-use management direction for the Tongass that provides for a healthy timber industry as well as protects and enhances prime game and fish habitats.

Over the course of the next four days, we were treated to amazing weather (the Tongass is part of the largest temperate rainforest on the planet, and some parts receive 16 feet of rain annually!) and equally impressive hospitality.

The field portion of the trip began with a cookout aboard *Alaskan Grandeur*. We were joined by several staff members from both the U.S. Forest Service and Alaska

Department of Fish & Game. In fact, one of the ADF&G biologists provided fresh wild salmon which Alisha grilled to perfection. We spent the evening socializing and preparing for a full day of field visits beginning the following morning.

Kuiu Island has produced many trophy-book black bear. It has also experienced significant timber

harvest activity. The staff from the USFS and ADF&G took us on a tour of the northwest portion of the island, but residual snow and downed trees kept us on the main roads. We examined culverts which can inhibit salmon migration, and clear-cuts of various age classes to see how the forest rebounds after logging. One of the major challenges of logging and conservation in Southeast Alaska is the topography. Heavy precipitation on steep slopes washes sedimentation into the waterways. While logging can lead to an abundance of new growth in the years immediately following the harvest, over time the forest closes in since all the new trees are the same age. With little light penetrating the canopy, the forest floor becomes sterile. In an old-growth forest, the diversity of size and ages of trees engenders a much more productive ecosystem, due to the opening in the canopy created by old trees falling.

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This sediment has been washed out of this clear-cut watershed by the heavy rainfall. The Tongass averages over 16 feet of rain annually.

Whereas knowledge of forest management for silviculture purposes is much deeper than knowledge of forest management for wildlife habitat enhancement; and

Whereas the decline of old-growth forests globally makes the conservation of the remaining tracts of these areas increasingly more important; and

Whereas these areas provide some of the best remaining opportunities for sportsmen and -women to pursue fish and wildlife in a truly remote setting miles from another human being; and

Whereas the rarity of the temperate rainforest habitats of the Tongass no longer allows us to maintain the status quo as a management direction;

We therefore propose the following recommendations be considered as the Forest Service plans its future management on the Tongass:

Watersheds with significant old-growth forest should have the highest priority for conservation. Timber management should focus on areas with more extensive previous logging and existing roads.

Fish and wildlife conservation measures should emphasize maintaining sustainable populations of fish and wildlife (for sport, subsistence, and commercial uses) not just viable populations.

Where past timber harvest has significantly reduced the extent of certain old-growth types, research and management should focus on restoration of old-growth attributes on managed forestland, particularly in areas deemed sensitive or essential as wildlife habitat.

Forest planning and management should begin an immediate transition process from harvesting old growth to an emphasis on second-growth harvest and restoration work beneficial to fish and wildlife habitats.

Research on timber practices and treatment of second growth with respect to impacts and benefits to wildlife habitat should receive increased funding.

Collaboration between the USFS, state and private forest managers, and fish and wildlife managers at both the federal and state level should continue. Such collaboration will yield the best results for wildlife and outdoor recreation.

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Deer have an especially difficult time if they are not able to find winter browse.

After our Kuiu Island day tour, we spent the next day on the water, traveling up Chatham Strait which separates Admiralty Island from Baranof and Chichagof Islands. The "ABC" islands are home to a genetically-distinct population of brown bears, isolated from mainland brown bears for over 40,000 years. Some of the highest brown bear population densities in the world are found within the Tongass National Forest, and the ABC islands hold roughly 70% of the brown bears in Southeast Alaska. Our eyes and ears were on high alert as we spent a day hiking and fishing at Lake Eva on Baranof Island! It was a free day to enjoy a watershed untouched by roads or other development. We were blessed with continued perfect weather and no close encounters with any species of the genus *ursa*. Another great dinner onboard capped an ideal day in the wilderness.

The third day of our trip began with another site visit with field staff from the U.S. Forest Service. We landed on Chichagof Island where the Forest Service is researching methods of managing logged areas. One promising idea involves removing some of the new trees and varying the spacing between the remaining trees to more closely simulate an old-growth forest. More light on the forest floor also stimulates faster tree growth. After bidding farewell to our Forest Service hosts, we boarded the Alaskan Grandeur to return to Juneau. Experiencing the entire Tongass National Forest would take months at least, and we had only a few days to gain an overview. But our every view of the Tongass included large scars of clear-cut land that would not fully recover for 200 years.

Clear-cutting has obvious detrimental effects on drainage, which hinders or eliminates the ability of salmon to return to their spawning grounds. The health of the salmon population is fundamental to the health of the entire ecosystem.

Our final night onboard was devoted to a round-table discussion among the trip participants of everything we learned both first and second hand. Our sources included

respected professors and biologists, a former USFWS manager, and volunteer leaders and board members of several conservation groups. We crafted a "document of findings and

recommendations" and submitted it to the U.S. Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (see sidebar). It is apparent there is no easy or quick resolution

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Wildlife research should identify how structural and compositional attributes of various old-growth types affect different wildlife species. Emphasis should be placed on those species associated with rare or dwindling old-growth resources, such as species dependant on old, large trees, or species requiring large intact areas of old-growth.

The Tongass Futures Roundtable meetings should continue, with adequate representation from sportsmen and –women, and fish and wildlife management professionals. The willingness of this diverse group of stakeholders to sit down and address the issues facing the forest is an important step toward working out a long-term plan for the forest that balances the interests of all parties.

Silvicultural research and monitoring should focus on transitioning from old growth harvest to second-growth harvest and alternatives to clear-cutting, such as variable retention and harvest methods of single trees and small-group selection.

Retention of old-growth reserves should be viewed as a long-term investment in non-timber resources. Increased retention within cutting units should not be negated by adding more cutting units, increasing the size of cutting units, or by later harvesting the identified retention area.

Forest planning and management should make every effort to minimize the construction of new roads.

If actions are not taken now, these opportunities will be diminished for generations to come, and we fear this will eliminate future opportunities for hunters and anglers to pursue fish and wildlife on the Tongass.

While we applaud the inclusion of a conservation strategy in the TLMP Adjustment process, we believe the conservation strategy by itself is insufficient and additional emphasis should be placed on protection of intact watersheds of high ecological value.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our input as the Forest Service develops a plan for future management of the Tongass. We sincerely believe that management of the forest with a multiple use direction can achieve results beneficial to fish and wildlife populations, recreation and tourism economies, and a timber industry focused on second-growth harvest and restoration projects.

To learn more about the Tongass National Forest, visit the following web sites:

Official U.S. Forest Service site:

www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass

Trout Unlimited "Where the Wild Lands Are" report: www.tu.org/atf/cf/%7B0D18ECB7-7347-445B-A38E-65-B282BBBD8A%7D/+Roadless_AK_f.pdf

Tongass Futures Roundtable:

www.tongassfutures.net



This section of Chichagof Island is part of a USFS study of the effect of culling the second growth to open up the canopy by varying the spacing between trees. This method is costly, but it more closely mimics a forest's natural growth patterns.

to the ongoing debate over the future of the Tongass. Logging has been the dominant sector of the region's economy, but it has been supplanted by tourism. Tourism, including sport hunting and fishing, depends heavily on wild places. However, we agreed the timber industry must survive. It has an opportunity to adapt by harvesting more second-growth timber, which can be accessed from the existing road system, and less of the remaining old-growth reserves. These old-growth reserves are the most ecologically important and provide the lion's share of the best recreational hunting and angling opportunities on the Tongass.

In addition, another major opportunity exists in restoration projects – adaptively managing areas which have been previously logged and enhancing them to either reduce the time required to grow a harvestable tree or to make wildlife productivity the permanent top priority. The restoration economy is something that conservation leaders and timber interests view as a future in which they can collaborate. Along that line, the Tongass Futures Roundtable has been bringing together diverse interests to discuss future management of the forest. Our group was encouraged by this spirit of collaboration. It bodes well for a true multiple-use management model for the Tongass – one in which all interests thrive, none to the detriment of the others.

As our boat pulled into Juneau, we said our goodbyes and agreed to stay in touch and continue working on this issue. All of us and the groups we represent can play a role in determining the fate of some of Southeast Alaska's most valuable game and fish habitat. I was proud to represent Dallas Safari Club on this important trip, and I look forward to returning to the Tongass this fall to hunt black bear with the Rosenbruchs! *GT*