

# The Nellie Juan-College Fjord Wilderness Study Area:

America's Wild Jewel in the Chugach National Forest in South-central Alaska

## The Chugach

In the backyard of Anchorage, Alaska, stands a majestic rainforest: the Chugach National Forest in south-central Alaska. The Chugach is one of our nation's most ecologically diverse landscapes. It is a breathtaking place defined by rugged landscapes of rock and ice, yet it is also a place where wildlife thrives, where crystal-clear streams are overflowing with salmon and trout, and surrounding forest land is home to brown bears, bald eagles and an abundance of moose.



The Nellie Juan-College Glacier Wilderness Study Area in the Chugach National Forest. Photo by Debbie Miller

More than one million people visit the Chugach annually from all over the world to experience wilderness and its natural beauty; however, the forest also serves as the "backyard" for half of Alaska's residents. It where residents enjoy a wide range of recreational activities and where people come to hunt, fish and gather as part of a subsistence lifestyle. The Chugach is a place Alaska residents hold near and dear to their hearts – Alaskans love the Chugach!

## Prince William Sound, the Future Home of Wilderness in the Chugach

There are three distinct regions within the Chugach, including the Copper River Delta, the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound. The sound's prized seacoast region is comprised of more than 3,000 shore land miles of bays, coves and deep fjords. The ice-capped peaks of the Chugach Mountains reach skyward from a pristine coast of giant spruce trees and verdant vegetation. Immense glaciers crawl their way through mountain valleys into adjacent fjords and inlets. The sound's serene and calm waters provide homes for a wide range of bird and marine life. Innumerable islands dot the landscape, while ebbing tides unveil rocky shores and tide pools that are festooned with a diverse array of inter tidal life. It is truly a unique and beautiful place.

## The Nellie Juan-College Fjord Wilderness Study Area

In 1980, Congress designated the 2.1-million-acre Nellie Juan-College Fjord Wilderness Study Area (WSA) in western Prince William Sound. Congress directed the U.S. Forest Service to study the area and report back on the suitability of all, part, or none of the area as federal Wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act and the modifying provisions in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). In 1984, the Forest Service recommended to Congress that most of the area be designated as federal Wilderness, as well as approximately 48,000 additional acres in the upper Snow River area on the Kenai Peninsula. The Forest Service agreed to manage the area as if it were wilderness until Congress was able to act and designate it as Wilderness.

In 2002, the Forest Service was working on an updated forest management plan for the Chugach. Congress had yet to act on its Wilderness recommendations, so as part of the 2002 revision of the Chugach's management plan, the Forest Service took a smaller Wilderness area recommendation to

Congress. However, to date the recommendation seems to have died and the Chugach continues to be our only National Forest without an acre of designated Wilderness in it.

### Why Now?

In 2010, the Obama administration released a new forest planning rule and designated eight forests to be the early adopters of these new regulations. The Chugach is one of these forests. The Forest Service is in the process of revising the Chugach's management plan and will make its third recommendation on the WSA to Congress in the near future. It is important that the Forest Service recommends a Wilderness area that truly protects the wilderness character unique to the Chugach.

### Why a Wilderness designation?

We have the opportunity to act to protect the Nellie Juan before it loses its wilderness character. Future threats to the Nellie Juan could be significant in the coming years:

- **Potential large-scale commercial fishing.** In 1980, the Forest Service permitted two large-scale fish hatcheries to be built within the WSA (Main Bay and Cannery Creek). Today those hatcheries continue to expand and modernize and attract heavy commercial fishing activity to remote areas alongside the WSA.
- **Increased pollution.** In 2000, the tunnel to Whittier allowed an influx of motor boats to access once-remote parts of the WSA, bringing litter, air pollution, noise, unauthorized developments, pressure on fish and wildlife, diminished opportunities for remoteness, and even conflict among user groups.
- **Increased boat and foot traffic.** Population growth and increases in the standard of living in Anchorage and in Kenai Peninsula communities has resulted in more visitors and boats in Prince William Sound. Research in 2009 by the University of Alaska Fairbanks showed that this increase in motor vehicles is decreasing air quality; in addition, visibility in the summer is diminished by up to 30% due to ship emissions.
- **Unknown usage of the area.** So much helicopter, commercial tourism and commercial camping is occurring in the WSA that the Forest Service no longer has a good working knowledge of permitted and non-permitted activity, which allows steady degradation of wilderness character.

Most importantly, WSA status is an interim designation, meant to preserve the area's wilderness character until Congress determines whether to designate all or part of the area as federal Wilderness. A final Wilderness determination was supposed to occur within a few years after passage of ANILCA, and presumably upon completion of the Forest Service's first Wilderness review in 1984. The Nellie Juan has been in limbo for more than 30 years. It's well past time to create Wilderness in the Chugach!

**For More Information:**  
**Contact Alaska Wilderness League's Rainforest Program Director at (202)544-5205**  
**Or visit [www.alaskawild.org](http://www.alaskawild.org)**