



The Tongass National Forest: Recreationalists' Paradise and Wildlife Lover's Dream

Background

The Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska is known as the U.S. Forest Service's "crown jewel" and is one of the last remaining intact temperate rainforests in the world.

The Tongass is truly a "salmon forest" and a wildlife lover's dream. With over 5,500 salmon streams, the Tongass is home to all five species of Pacific salmon, as well as steelhead and resident trout, brown and black bear, Sitka black-tailed deer, humpback whales, bald eagles, wolves and many other fish and wildlife species.

The forest is a recreationalists' paradise and its natural beauty and wildlife serve as an economic driver for the region. Outdoor recreation opportunities such as hunting, angling and wildlife watching are valuable not only for pure enjoyment, but also for attracting tourists and generating new businesses – over one million visitors come to the Tongass each year, contributing \$1 billion to the region's economy and supporting over 10,000 jobs. Additionally, approximately 7,300 fish related jobs rely on a healthy Tongass. According to a study conducted by Trout Unlimited, commercial and sport fishing are one of the top economic drivers in southeast Alaska, contributing over \$986 million to the region's economy and is estimated at more than 10 percent of the region's jobs. Ensuring that the Tongass remains intact and sustainably managed safeguards the region's tourism industry, commercial fishing industry and local economy.



Brown bears with salmon in Pack Creek. ©Amy Gulick/amygulick.com



Whales bubble net feeding. By Evadb; Edit by jjron. (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Why Protect Watersheds?



Salmon spawning. ©Amy Gulick/amygulick.com

In the rainforest, salmon are the keystone species in the forest's web of life. Born in freshwater rivers, salmon head out to the ocean to mature, and then return to their birth streams to spawn. As salmon spawn throughout the streams of the Tongass, they bring the marine nutrients of the ocean in their bodies. Bears, eagles, wolves and other predators drag salmon carcasses into the forest where their bodies decompose and feed the trees, plants and support the surrounding wildlife habitat. In fact, scientists have discovered that

marine nutrients from salmon are in the trees. By protecting the most productive salmon streams and rivers on the watershed level, from ridge to shore, we will provide the best protections for all species in

the forest. In turn, an intact Tongass safeguards the region's tourism industry, commercial fishing industry and local economy.

Tongass 77 Proposal

Tongass 77 is a proposal based on the best science available. Researchers from the Alaska offices of the Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited spent five years using state-of-the-art Geographic Information System and conservation planning software to identify the watersheds they consider the “best of the best” for salmon and trout habitat. They analyzed hundreds of Tongass watersheds that are not currently protected. The “best of the best” includes habitat where the most diverse populations of salmon species thrive, dense populations of species thrive, and typically areas where the largest trees grow.

The high-value watersheds identified, comprising some 1.9 million acres, are currently open to development. Based on their outstanding fish habitat, the highest and best use of these watersheds should be for the production of salmon and trout and preservation of wildlife species that attract tourists to the Tongass. The Tongass 77 proposal is based on the idea that holistic watershed protection, including vital streams, rivers and waterways throughout the Tongass, would preserve healthy salmon stocks, and the forest, plants, animals and people who depend on salmon for their livelihood or subsistence.

A way to achieve this needed protection of fish production would be federal legislation that places these watersheds into Land Use Designation II (LUD II). This designation was applied through congressional action for twelve areas of the Tongass through the Tongass Timber Reform Act of 1990. These twelve areas, according to the “Tongass Timber Reform Act Conference Report,” were “chosen *for* special management because of their critical importance for fish and wildlife habitat and their high value to tourism and recreation.” Although commercial timber harvest is not permitted in LUD II areas, they are open for traditional gathering, fishing, hunting and recreational use. LUD II areas are also open to wildlife and fish habitat improvement, mineral development and some hydropower generation opportunities.

Designating the Tongass 77 as LUD II areas would ensure both the wild land character and the extraordinary salmon and trout values of these watersheds are maintained in perpetuity while ensuring access to guides and outfitters to share these special places with the world. To sign onto the Tongass 77 proposal, please visit www.TourtheTongass.org/tongass77.

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