

The Value of Wilderness in Southeastern Alaska

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More than 100 years ago, John Muir explored what was to become the Tongass National Forest in a Tlingit Indian canoe. He described the grandeur of this incredible place as an "endless rhythm and beauty". Some of this rhythm and beauty endures today as congressionally designated wilderness and other lands protected in perpetuity under the Tongass Timber Reform Act to preserve their outstanding wildland character. Additionally, many wild and special places in the Tongass National Forest have been proposed for wilderness designations for decades by dedicated folks who live and work in Alaska.

The names of some of these special places deserving of lasting protection include Gambier and Pybus bays in Admiralty Island's Kootznoowoo Wilderness, Misty Fjords National Monument Wilderness, Tebenkof Bay, Kadashan, and Nutkwa. Arguably, these special places, and many more, evoke magical qualities, biological wonders beyond compare, historical heritage, living legends, and hoped-for lasting legacies. These areas, in my opinion, are the beating heart of this living rainforest. These wild areas, and many more yet to be protected, like Honker Divide (on Prince of Wales Island), Cleveland Peninsula (north of Ketchikan), Rocky Pass (between Kuiu and Kupreanof islands), Port Houghton (south of Juneau), Lake Eva (on northern Baranof Island), and the western shore of Tenakee Inlet (on Chichagof Island) deserve secure and lasting protections.

It is simply impossible to adequately describe the true value of these places. Rather, picture yourself along the banks of a Tongass river, a river that serves as lifeblood for all you see before you. It's July, and this ancient forest is full of life—the adjoining ocean,



FIG 1. View north up Tracy Arm in the Tracy Arm-Fiords Terror Wilderness (John Schoen)

bays, and saltwater channels are teeming with humpback whales, orcas, seabirds, and so much more. As you stand beside this stream, you are astounded by the incredibly vibrant sounds, sights, smells, and spirit of life all around you. Above, in the sky, bald eagles and ravens; beside you on the bank, brown bears (coastal grizzlies), and Sitka black-tailed deer (and wolves and black bears along the mainland and on the southern islands); and below you, the pulsating waters burst with the abundance of renewing life: spawning salmon. Connecting this miracle of life together are ancient spruce and hemlock trees, some more than 8 ft (2.4 m) in diameter. This riverside perch is a special place—a wild salmon forest. The surrounding rainforest presents a true wonder to behold—life in perfect balance. Blessed with congressional wilderness and roadless protections, this and other special Tongass places and their intact ecosystems will be secure forever.

"Wilderness ... the very word is music," once wrote famous author and wilderness advocate Edward Abbey. The images described above, along an intact wild salmon river within the Tongass, are the music of the earth. Wilderness is a lasting source of peace and quiet and solitude—a touchstone of inspiration for music and poetry, sanity, and humility. Wilderness is a place where the air is cleaner and water more pure than in other environments. It is a place where the highest-quality forms of outdoor recreation such as hiking, kayaking, canoeing, camping, fishing, and hunting take place; and where body, mind, heart, and soul are recreated and rejuvenated. Wilderness is where you can find freedom; freedom for yourself and your family and freedom for your public lands. In fact, the congressional definition of wilderness is described as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man." The word untrammelled is sometimes confused with "untrampled," but it means, "unshackled, allowed to run free." Wilderness designation does not lock up the land, instead it frees public lands from the pressures of cumulative developments.

When Congress defined wilderness, it also noted that wilderness should have outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation, and that it may also embrace ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. The wilderness areas within the Tongass, and the additional wild places that truly deserve to be protected by Congress as wilderness, most definitely contain absolutely incredible ecological, geological, scientific, educational, scenic, and historical values. There is not enough space here to fully elaborate on these amazing attributes. For a vivid example, picture a Haida or Tlingit canoe gliding across the still waters of a placid bay, just like it was hundreds of years ago, along the shoreline of a Tongass wilderness area.

Wilderness safeguards key habitat for a variety of thriving populations of fish and wildlife species. Protected places enhance subsistence uses by Alaskans, and secure world-class areas for hunting and fishing for sportsmen and sportswomen. Wilderness with wild salmon watersheds provides critical spawning and rearing areas for fisheries that sustain the Alaska commercial fishing industry year in and year out. The rapidly expanding tourism and recreation industries of Alaska are bolstered by protected wild places. When the land is protected "like it is," the tangible and

intangible benefits that Southeast communities receive are numerous and perpetual. Truly, wilderness is an invaluable asset to Alaskans and Americans far and wide.

In 1961, Adolph Murie wrote, "Alaska, has for most of us a magic ring." Today, Alaska still has a magic ring to it, in large part due to the existing wilderness areas in the Tongass and the proposed wilderness areas that deserve lasting protections in the future. Securing this lasting legacy of protection will truly ensure that our "Last Frontier" never becomes our "Lost Frontier."



FIG 2. Port Houghton on the mainland coast south of Juneau. (John Schoen)