

A photograph of a dense forest with tall, straight trees and sunlight filtering through the canopy. The sun is visible as a bright glow in the upper right, casting long rays of light through the trees. The forest floor is covered in green moss and low-lying plants.

BLUEPRINT FOR SOUTHEAST ALASKA: A NEW STORY FOR THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

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Photo credit: Diana Portner

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tongass National Forest has been a source of bitter controversy for decades, leading to a focus on national politics that overshadow locally driven opportunities and solutions. A growing number of individuals recognize it is time for a new story. This story is centered on Southeast Alaska's social and cultural strengths and offers an expansive, balanced, and holistic vision encompassing the entire range of opportunities.

This Blueprint for the Tongass National Forest harnesses the shared interest of people and communities of Southeast Alaska in developing collaborative approaches that align with needs of a changing world. The recommendations offer suggested priorities, practices, and policies for Federal, Regional, and Forest leadership that advance multiple interests – environmental, social, and economic.

There is an opportunity for a new story.

Future management priorities can mirror the diverse needs and opportunities of the region, reflecting the voices of Alaska Natives that have lived on and cared for this land for time immemorial and present communities that call the Forest their home. The following themes emerged from discussions with stakeholders throughout the region, with a focus on progress that can happen on the ground.

Economic Diversification The pandemic has disproportionately impacted rural communities, creating wide-reaching socioeconomic challenges throughout Southeast Alaska, and the Tongass National Forest can play a part in recovery. Strategic investments in local capacity can create long-term resilience and prosperity, building innovation across the region.

Fisheries and Mariculture Commercial fisheries are a prime economic driver and private sector employer, supporting a way of life compatible with Alaska's pristine environment and isolated communities. Investments can target key components to successful operations – forest management activities that steward the fisheries resource, waterfront infrastructure that provides access and essential services, and research and support for emerging mariculture.

Recreation and Visitor Services The Tongass is a world class destination for tourists and adventurers, evidenced by the significant economic contribution of the visitor industry. While demand grows, though, the Forest Service's budget remains the same, leading to a backlog of deferred maintenance. Investments in infrastructure and staff capacity, identified through direct coordination with outfitters and guides, will afford continued economic growth.

Renewable Energy Renewable energy remains a largely untapped resource with tremendous potential to both offset high costs of energy and reduce carbon output. USDA Rural Development investment programs for renewable energy – such as research grants, pilot projects, and infrastructure investments – can chart a sustainable energy future.

Carbon Sequestration USDA, through its Climate 21 Plan, acknowledges the importance of climate mitigation. As the nation's largest National Forest and one of the largest intact temperate rainforests globally, the Tongass must be part of any national climate strategy. Investment in a regional climate task force can allow for exploration of region-specific economic opportunities and barriers, including the use of metrics and targets to optimize climate resilience.

Sustainable Timber Products The shifting emphasis away from a predominant focus on timber management to one that fully encompasses a range of resource values compels a new vision of the timber products industry. Small sales for traditional cultural uses and specialized products can be coupled with a growing young growth market to provide a variety of essential wood products for the region. Capital investments and small business loans for local timber industry owners can provide the opportunity to acquire modern, efficient equipment that aligns with new opportunities.

People are at the heart of decision-making.

Recognizing that people are at the heart of decision-making, this effort also outlines strategies to achieve true consultation and collaboration with Alaska Natives and local communities.

Tribal Co-management Tribal consultation and cooperating agency status, the standard methods for gathering input about Tongass management from Tribes and Native Corporations, are too often perceived as “check the box” processes that are well intentioned but inadequate at best, and dismissive at worst. The willingness of leaders in all levels of government to acknowledge past grievances and assume responsibility for taking steps to make the situation better now is vital. Emerging initiatives and models, such as the Indigenous Guardians Network, can be built upon so that Alaska Native voices are truly part of decision-making. There is an opportunity to institutionalize and invest in Tribal co-management approaches that authorize Alaska Natives to set and implement management priorities.

Community and Regional Collaboration Collaborative approaches – at local and regional levels – have helped the region overcome long standing acrimony and continue to play an important role across Southeast Alaska. Involving the people who live locally, and who have a stake in and knowledge about conditions in and around their communities, can both inform agency decisions and ideally build local support for those decisions. Through increased investment in collaborative projects and active engagement by agency staff, existing collaboratives can help develop and implement community-based projects and regional-level efforts that support the Forest Service in achieving its mission.

Progress happens on the ground.

While the Tongass has gained national-level attention, there is often a disconnect between high-level political priorities and actionable solutions at the local level, which require tangible, localized action and capacity to make a difference.

Wildlife Habitat and Forest Health There is a tremendous backlog of acres in need of active management to benefit fisheries, wildlife habitat, subsistence access and resource availability, and timber productivity, yet they have received limited investment. Increasing investment and agency coordination in these activities – including thinning, habitat restoration, and research – can achieve ecological gains while also creating local workforce opportunities.

Watershed and Riparian Restoration The Tongass National Forest is one of the largest salmon producing landscapes in North America. Investing in watershed restoration activities to remedy historical management issues can provide job opportunities and ecological benefits, creating more robust and resilient fisheries in the face of a changing climate. Resources are needed to evaluate and remedy threats to salmon habitat, including NEPA-cleared projects that can put contractors to work immediately.

Subsistence and Traditional Use Subsistence considerations cut across all aspects of forest management including protection of and access to places where hunting, gathering, and foraging are important; jobs derived from forest-based activities that provide livelihoods; care for the salmon resource; and a meaningful role for Native peoples in decision-making about subsistence policies. A Tribal appointee to the Federal Subsistence Board can offer Tribal influence at the national-level, and local land management planning can ensure subsistence needs are reflected on the ground.



Photo Credit: Diana Portner

BLUEPRINT FOR SOUTHEAST ALASKA: A NEW STORY FOR THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

Introduction

The Tongass National Forest is many things to many people – an intact temperate rainforest and ecological treasure, the ancestral homeland of indigenous people who are a part of the fabric of the landscape and who use and depend on the place today, and the economic lifeblood and identity for the region. As a result, the Forest has been a source of bitter controversy for decades. Although the Forest belongs to all Americans, the national-level disputes about how it is managed have often obscured local interests and needs. There is growing interest from diverse stakeholders across Southeast Alaska in developing broadly supported management solutions that provide better socioeconomic opportunities while conserving the natural resources they and the nation depend upon.

The purpose of the Tongass Blueprint is to develop a solution roadmap with suggested priorities, practices, and policies for Federal, Regional, and Forest leadership. It is designed to harness the shared interest of people and communities of Southeast Alaska in developing collaborative approaches that align with needs of a changing world and advance multiple interests. It offers not only diverse solutions, but also a new lens to view decisions that impact the Forest. The Blueprint contributors are people who live and work in the region and whose livelihoods and wellbeing are deeply impacted by how the Tongass National Forest is managed. They are from Alaska Native Village Corporations and Tribes, the conservation community, academia, and the private sector, including timber, fisheries, and tourism among others.

There are always policies that remain controversial on the Tongass – there was not universal agreement from interviewees on topics such as the Roadless Rule, Alaska Natives Without Land, or the exact composition of a future timber industry. With a new Presidential Administration, more of these issues will likely arise, as initiatives like the 30 by 30 conservation target or US commitment to the Paris Climate Agreements begin to touch down in Alaska. This Blueprint can help steer Tongass National Forest priorities toward areas of agreement, while better navigating areas of disagreement.

There is an opportunity for a new story.

Although it is unlikely that all stakeholders would agree with every single suggestion contained in the Blueprint, the diversity of voices willing to participate in this process is an accomplishment that should be recognized. Most striking about the input was the convergence on a central theme that remained consistent across all interest sectors: that it is time for a new story on the Tongass. Stakeholders offered promising components of a new story, one that must be centered on the social and cultural strengths of Southeast Alaska – communities, people, and place. In its simplest terms, the new story is that the Tongass National Forest is much more than a battleground for timber disputes, and instead it is a place where:

1. Investment priorities reflect the true diversity of economic opportunities;
2. Local Tribes and communities are authentically involved in decision-making and implementation; and
3. On the ground management is prioritized over national-level controversy.

A True Diversity of Economic Opportunities

The Tongass has an abundance of natural resources that offer multiple avenues to social and economic prosperity and ecological well-being – world class recreation, abundant fisheries, mariculture potential, sustainable energy, mineral resources, and unparalleled forests. The forested landscape provides essential wildlife habitat, contributes to climate change mitigation, provides wood for traditional cultural uses, and is sufficient to support a wood products industry essential for land stewardship and locally important jobs.

Until now the Tongass timber program has received the most attention and a large share of the Forest’s budget (as well as fueling the most controversy). However, since timber is no longer the primary economic driver in the region, and the resource base to support the timber program is much diminished (with or without the Roadless Rule), it is time to shift management to a more expansive, balanced, and holistic vision that encompasses the entire range of needs and opportunities, including:

- Economic diversification;
- Wild Alaska fisheries and mariculture;
- Recreation and visitor services;
- Renewable energy;
- Carbon sequestration and climate resilience; and
- Sustainable timber products.

Economic Diversification

The Obama administration recognized the potential in Southeast Alaska and invested in an [economic diversification strategy](#) for the region. New approaches could build on that policy-level focus, emphasizing the multiple use mandate of the Forest Service, while supporting integrated management of the Forest’s many values. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted rural communities as they are more vulnerable and less resistant to economic downturns. Any new economic approaches should consider this impact and prioritize local jobs and partnerships with Tribes and communities.



Photo Credit: Diana Portner

OPPORTUNITIES

- 1. Invest in workforce development and capacity building** activities to ensure a capable workforce that can work in a diverse array of economic sectors. Representatives from all sectors often cite the difficulty in finding quality local hires that can do the work needed. Basic work skills training is needed followed by opportunities to develop career pathways.
- 2. Provide direct support for communities that have suffered economic declines.** The pandemic has deeply impacted the economy in Southeast Alaska: a steep decline in visitor services in the short-term and an all-time low commercial fishing season have devastated communities. Stimulus investments that “build back better” can create long-term resilience and prosperity, building on local innovations across the region through strategic investment in transportation infrastructure and other needs across the region.
- 3. Apply an ecosystem services valuation methodology to incentivize investments in resource stewardship that contribute to social and economic prosperity and ecosystem health.** An ecosystem services valuation approach has the potential to provide revenue for land management and restoration by accounting for intrinsic values of the land, including community, cultural, mental, and spiritual benefits.

4. **Utilize the Great America Outdoors Act (GAOA) as a new funding source.** The GAOA, a service that provides critical funding for public and private lands, is in high demand across the country. Southeast Alaska's population base, smaller than other localities competing for resources, creates a regional disadvantage. Accessing the funding will require concerted effort to elevate the nationally significant benefits to investing in the region.

Wild Alaska Fisheries and Mariculture

Commercial fisheries are the largest private sector employer in the State of Alaska and an economic driver for Southeast Alaska. Commercial fisheries support a way of life compatible with Alaska's pristine environment and rural/isolated communities. Fisheries are also important as a subsistence food source and for their recreational opportunity. The Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association petition from 2020 outlines useful suggestions for protecting and utilizing the region's fisheries for economic growth. The petition can serve as an important starting point for Forest Service investments in fisheries and measuring and tracking the role of Forest Service derived salmon and investments as a catalyst for rural prosperity.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Emphasize management activities that steward and promote the fisheries resource.** Increase investments in aquatic restoration activities such as culvert upgrades that will make more habitat available to salmon and mitigating strategies to reduce problems that have arisen from stream sedimentation. Protect bays and estuaries from sedimentation and contamination.
2. **Adopt metrics that measure salmon produced** on National Forest lands, the economic activity produced by Tongass derived salmon fisheries, and demonstrate to Congress and the American public the role of USDA in producing, protecting, and sustaining wild Alaskan salmon.
3. **Promote working waterfronts** through zoning and infrastructure investments that provide access and essential services to the fishing fleet.
4. **Enhance Southeast Alaskan resident participation in regional commercial fisheries** as a strategy to invest in rural development, create opportunities in Southeast Alaska rural communities, and multiply the regional economic contribution of Tongass salmon production.
5. **Support research and invest financially in locally owned mariculture,** including seaweed and kelp farming. Mariculture can be a source of jobs and contribute to the sustainable energy future of the region.



Photo Credit: Tyra Huestis

Recreation and Visitor Services

The Tongass National Forest is a world class destination for tourists and adventurers and is the backyard for communities of Southeast Alaska. The visitor industry is a significant driver for jobs and economic growth in the region, representing more than 10% of earnings in 2019, second only to government. Demand for recreation and visitor service amenities – landing sites for tour operators, trails for visitors and nearby communities, cabins, wildlife viewing areas, and more accessibility for people with limited mobility, to name a few – has increased exponentially in recent years. Aging facilities and a lack of trail maintenance present safety concerns, yet the Forest Service has limited capacity to address increasing demand and infrastructure needs. If prioritized, planned carefully, and managed well, the Forest's recreation and visitor services program will provide increasing economic benefits across the region and enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Increase investments in Forest infrastructure and staff capacity to enable tourism, recreation, and visitor services.** Prior to the pandemic, the visitor industry was surging, supporting thousands of jobs across the region, yet represented only a small fraction of the total Forest budget. Increasing recreation project funding and investing in staff capacity – particularly staff responsible for on-the-ground infrastructure work as opposed to more administrative and planning staff - can help address the backlog of deferred maintenance and support infrastructure for visitor services that offer more amenities and a range of recreational opportunities across the Forest. The Great America Outdoors Act provides a new funding source and an opportunity to leverage strategic investments that create economic multiplier opportunities.
2. **Actively engage outfitters, tour operators, and other tourism related businesses** in a rigorous assessment of existing and future infrastructure needs. Recruit agency staff with knowledge and background from the visitor industry to build agency capacity for better work in this sector.
3. **Focus on partnerships** with local communities, businesses, non-governmental organizations, Tribal and State entities, and others to work on infrastructure projects, create educational programs, and grow the visitor services industry, through strategies that contribute to local economies and are compatible with residents' quality of life.

Renewable Energy

The Tongass offers a variety of renewable energy opportunities – including hydropower, woody biomass, aquaculture-based biofuels, geothermal and tidal energy, among others. Renewable energy is currently deployed on a small scale in various places across the region – individual projects here and there – but remains a largely untapped resource with tremendous potential that can help communities offset high costs of energy, as well as reduce carbon output.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Adjust USDA Rural Development loans to increase feasibility of renewable energy projects.** Rural Development programs can offer tremendous resources for rural communities yet are poorly matched to the unique conditions and needs in Southeast Alaska, including the need for processes that are better suited for small businesses. Hydropower is an example of a significant resource that needs additional investment.
2. **Invest in renewable energy research grants and pilot projects.** Research can serve as the basis for understanding applicability of emerging technologies to Southeast Alaska and can clarify how to tailor technologies to the unique social and environmental context of the area. In many cases, pilot projects are needed to test feasibility.
3. **Invest in storage and distribution infrastructure for biomass energy, including seaweed, slash, and wood pellets.** Wood chips and pellets offer a promising energy source, but distribution options are limited due to the remote, island-based landscape. Community-based pellet storage facilities and investments in transportation infrastructure are required to take advantage of this opportunity. The Alaska Wood Energy Task Force can serve as an important resource in renewable energy expansion.



Photo Credit: NOAA Fisheries

Carbon Sequestration and Climate Resilience

The Biden administration has prioritized addressing the impacts of climate change, outlined in the [USDA Climate 21 Plan](#) and evidenced in recent executive orders. As the nation’s largest National Forest and one of the largest intact temperate rainforests in the world, the Tongass is a globally significant contributor to carbon sequestration, and therefore must be part of any national climate strategy.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Focus on climate metrics, including the possibility of regional carbon targets.** Careful use of metrics and targets could inform project planning and assessment to optimize carbon sequestration and climate resilience in conjunction with other resource needs.
2. **Convene a regionally-focused climate meeting or task force** to explore economic opportunities and barriers for climate sequestration in the region (potentially in concert with climate mitigation strategies identified by the Arctic Council); examine trade-offs and management options inherent in elevating climate considerations in relation to other activities; build upon previous work coordinated by the Alaska State Department of Environmental Conservation on mitigation and adaptation strategies to help inform new approaches within the climate arena; revisit the State’s gap analysis that helped identify research needs; and explore the possibility of expanding carbon market approaches to more jurisdictions. Identify roles for Alaska Native villages and corporations in development and implementation of climate strategies.

Sustainable Timber Products

The shifting emphasis away from a predominant focus on timber management to one that fully encompasses a range of resource values compels a new vision of the timber products industry. Although the Forest Service is the largest land manager in the region, the timber industry has always relied on an integrated relationship among State, private, and Federal ownerships. Sealaska, the regional Native Corporation, decided recently to significantly reduce timber operations. This decision will impact the overall wood supply system and affords an opportunity to reconsider how the Tongass National Forest conducts its timber program. The industry, while smaller than in previous decades, is an essential contributor to the economic and ecological health of Southeast Alaska, providing not only timber products, but also the active management necessary for wildlife habitat restoration and improvement.

Forest inventory efforts have illuminated a “wall of wood” – an abundance of young growth stands that will be ready for harvest in the same timeframe – in the managed stands of the Tongass and surrounding Native Corporations. There are opportunities to expand the young growth market, for example by using this wood for durable, long-term wooden buildings (mass timber) that can help offset carbon heavy alternatives like steel and concrete. Preparations need to begin now to avoid repeating the boom-and-bust history of timber harvest in Southeast Alaska and to take advantage of emerging opportunities. Achieving a consistent and predictable sustainable yield of timber volume will be essential to providing stability for business operations, investments, and employment. In addition, evaluation of markets and products, federal and state investments, and development of public-private partnerships will be needed. The new



timber story on the Tongass will require hard work, collaboration, investment, and social capital to support a new approach to forest management that does not attract conflict and headlines.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Support small- and micro- timber sales.** Emphasize focused timber sales for specialized products, including supply for cultural arts, music wood, biofuel, and local construction, among other local uses.
2. **Prioritize management of cedar for cultural use.** Alaska Natives rely on selective harvest of red and yellow cedar trees for totems and other traditional cultural uses.
3. **Reorganize and/or reallocate the timber budget** to account for a smaller, more focused, and cost-efficient timber program. Place additional emphasis on other forest programs, including forest health and habitat restoration needs that support broader forest uses and economic opportunities.
4. **Invest in timber industry owners and operators in a transition to local, value-added young growth markets.** To be economically viable, operators will need capital investment and small business loans to acquire modern, efficient equipment designed for small diameter timber, as well as training for such a transition. Opportunities for investment include emerging technologies like mass timber for lower-carbon footprint construction, local materials sourcing for construction, and a market appetite for products that are economically and environmentally regenerative.
5. **Continue the young growth forest inventory** for long-term supply planning purposes. The work will help model and plan the long-term supply, management units, and future sale areas.

Meaningful Collaborative Decision-Making

There is a tremendous hunger in the region for meaningful collaboration, engagement, and shared decision-making. Decision-making about how this national forest requires a role for leadership at all levels – Federal, State and local, but especially for the Native people of Southeast Alaska who stewarded the Tongass landscape, their home, for thousands of years before those lands were taken.

People are at the heart of decision-making.

Tribal Co-management

Tribal consultation and cooperating agency status, the standard methods for gathering input about Tongass management from Tribes and Native Corporations, are too often perceived as “check the box” processes that are well intentioned but inadequate at best, and dismissive at worst. Sovereign Tribal governments in Southeast Alaska have long sought to work cooperatively with USDA in decisions that affect the traditional lands of Alaska Native people, but often feel their knowledge and expertise is not incorporated into the protection and utilization of the Forest’s resources. The majority of the region’s Tribes (12 out of 19) joined together to submit an Administrative Procedures Act petition outlining these challenges, as well as new approaches to moving forward. There are several emerging initiatives and models that can be built upon so that Alaska Native voices, and the voices of other community members across the region, are truly part of decision-making processes that determine how the Tongass is managed and that equity is pursued related to Tongass management and decision-making.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Institutionalize Tribal co-management approaches on the Tongass National Forest** that authorize Alaska Natives to set and implement on-the-ground management priorities. Because co-management represents a significant, and potentially controversial, departure from current management norms, convene a process among Federal, State and Tribal entities to explore different co-management models, build support, and plan for a transition toward a new approach(es). The new Indigenous Guardians Network offer lessons that could be built upon. (See call-out box to the right for more information.) The Forest Service can also use existing partnership authorities, including Section 638 contracting, to advance Tribal partnerships and co-management approaches.
2. **Invest in capacity-building.** A co-management approach will require appropriate staffing and funding allocations – among both the agency and the Tribes. With appropriate resources, the co-management approach can be developed intentionally and implemented in a way that is set up for success.
3. **Acknowledge and apologize for the harm that was done to Native communities in Southeast Alaska in the past** when their lands were taken. Trust was broken then and, although there have been steps to redress some of the damage, it has been damaged recently during the controversy over the Roadless Rule. The willingness of leaders in all levels of government to acknowledge past grievances and assume responsibility for taking steps to make the situation better now is vital.
4. **Work collaboratively to address Landless Native communities.** Five communities in Southeast Alaska have made claims that they were left out of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and are owed land. Previous legislation has attempted to address these claims, with the most recent proposed legislation seeking to create five new urban corporations with 23,000 acres of land from the Tongass. Like many land management disputes in the region, the issue has been fraught with controversy. Addressing Alaska Native Landless Claims could heal longstanding distrust or could continue to exacerbate division and conflict, depending on the process and the outcome.

Photo Credit: Ecotrust



INDIGENOUS GUARDIANS NETWORK: A MODEL FOR SUCCESSFUL CO-MANAGEMENT

The Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska and the Forest Service, through a regional network called the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, have partnered to support a nascent Indigenous Guardians Network for Southeast Alaska. This network will be dedicated to supporting Alaska Native communities in expressing their inherent sovereignty while creating opportunities for these communities to conserve their homelands and traditional ways of life for future generations.

This Indigenous Guardians Network is a model of joint staffing and a collaborative approach to Tongass management and partnerships between Tribal entities and the Forest Service. As this project develops, it can offer other potential ways that the Forest Service can develop working relationships with Alaska Native Tribal entities for resource management and stewardship.

Community and Regional Collaboration

Collaborative approaches – at local and regional levels – have helped the region overcome long standing acrimony and continue to play an important role across the Tongass. These existing collaboratives need additional financial support and more direct engagement by the Forest Service to be effective, especially as they address new challenges like climate change and infrastructure coordination. The agency needs to demonstrate its willingness to share in planning and decision-making processes by showing up in communities, meeting people where they are at, listening to local interests, actively partnering with, and participating in collaboratives, and utilizing their input.

OPPORTUNITIES

- 1. Increase investment in collaborative groups and projects.** Significant local-level planning has taken place in communities such as Hoonah and Kake through community forest partnerships; and on Prince of Wales Island through the Prince of Wales Landscape Assessment Team. However, communities need capacity funding to both organize these efforts, and to implement projects identified through their collaboration. Habitat restoration and forest regeneration projects are in particular need of funding – fish habitat partnerships offer an opportunity for growth. The Great American Outdoors Act could support such efforts through funding for collaborative project prioritization. In addition, USDA State and Private Forestry has partnered with the State of Alaska in successful Challenge Cost-Share Agreements that make these efforts possible in the past and could continue through future funding.
- 2. Encourage active engagement by Forest Service staff in local and regional collaboratives.** High turnover among agency staff results in limited institutional knowledge regarding management decisions and approaches; increased engagement locally could help provide that enduring memory. The Sustainable Southeast Partnership is a collective impact network of Tribes, non-governmental organizations, Native Corporations, and in-region businesses that have catalyzed successful initiatives, business start-ups, and collaboration. Forest Service engagement with this network to convene and catalyze could be an important venue for advancing collaborative initiatives.
- 3. Support approaches to shared decision-making, community planning, and engagement at the local level.** Involving the people who live locally, and who have a stake in and knowledge about conditions in and around their communities, can both inform agency decisions and ideally build local support for those decisions. Beyond local and community scale planning efforts, collaboration at the regional level can provide much needed forums for stakeholders and Forest staff to grapple with pressing issues, build support for new initiatives, and offer longevity and institutional knowledge that historically has been lost as staff leave the Region.

COMMUNITY FOREST PARTNERSHIPS: BRINGING COMMUNITY MEMBERS INTO LAND MANAGEMENT

With support of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, two rural, Alaska Native communities – Hoonah and Kake – have developed and begun implementing innovative “community forest partnerships” for management of the surrounding landscape. These innovative partnerships brought together landowners and managers, including the Forest Service, Native Village Corporations, and Sealaska the regional Native corporation.

Community visioning sessions helped gauge community priorities and a landscape-scale management approach was developed to identify community priorities, including:

- Traditional and customary resource use;
- Opportunities for local job creation;
- Restoration needs for critical cultural and ecological functions; and
- A common and agreed-upon vision for the landscape.

These community forests exemplify Alaska Native identity and involvement in land and resource management, model long-term landscape scale planning, and demonstrate how to create local opportunities from resource management – models that can be replicated across the region.

Prioritizing on the Ground Management

While the Tongass has gained national-level attention, there is often a disconnect between high-level political priorities and actionable solutions at the local level, such as sustainable rural development, habitat restoration, and priority investments. Many of these needs and opportunities are referenced in preceding sections, and have been the subject of prior efforts that have identified specific projects that are ready to implement, but require tangible, localized action, investment, and capacity to make a difference.

Progress happens on the ground.

Wildlife Habitat and Forest Health

There is a tremendous backlog of acres in need of active management to benefit fisheries, wildlife habitat, subsistence access and resource availability, and timber productivity, yet they have received limited investment. Increasing investments in these activities can also create workforce opportunities for local communities. In the areas of the Tongass where logging has occurred, management activities that improve both wildlife habitat and silvicultural characteristics of young growth stands are critical.



Photo Credit:
Sheila Spores

OPPORTUNITIES

- 1. Support and accelerate the organizational shift within the Tongass National Forest to better coordinate and integrate silvicultural and wildlife considerations in management decision-making.** Silvicultural and wildlife staff on the Tongass are increasingly working together to implement management actions that reverse the trend of decreasing population of deer and wildlife, increase the growth rate of trees, and reduce the time it takes for stands to return to old growth conditions, but siloed expertise within the agency continues to be an issue.
- 2. Allocate more resources to thinning needs, including pre-commercial thinning,** which provides wildlife habitat benefit in addition to local job opportunities. Current thinning needs surpass available funding and capacity. Additional investment could support local entrepreneurial opportunities through training, equipment, and infrastructure. The [2020 pre-commercial thinning task force](#) offered detailed recommendations for the Forest's thinning program.
- 3. Invest in research to explore ecosystem function across the landscape.** Topics to explore include broader exploration of biogeographic and ecological processes, climate change impacts and adaptation strategies, karst vulnerabilities, impacts of land management approaches on wildlife, and restoration needs and treatment strategies.
- 4. Integrate local Tribes, University of Alaska Southeast, and workforce development investments** into research, implementation, and monitoring of forest management activities, including thinning and restoration work.

Watershed and Riparian Restoration

The Tongass National Forest is one of the largest salmon producing landscapes in North America and supports thriving fisheries that generate hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity. Investing in watershed restoration activities to remedy historical management issues can provide job opportunities and ecological benefits, creating more robust and resilient fisheries in the face of a changing climate.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Allocate resources to evaluate and remedy threats to salmon habitat.** Currently, there are over 250 miles of salmon spawning streams blocked by failed culverts that need replacing, as well as a suite of watersheds with degraded function that need repair work to remedy issues from past management activities. In addition to the allocation of existing resources to these efforts, programs including the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership and the Southeast Alaska Mitigation Fund (an in-lieu-fee program), offer opportunities for increased funding moving forward.
2. **Invest in training and prioritize restoration work for people in local communities.** Watershed restoration over the last decade has demonstrated that in-region contractors can develop the skills to do restoration work. Investments in restoration activities improves watershed conditions, resulting in improved salmon spawning and rearing.
3. **Fund shovel-ready, NEPA cleared projects that can put contractors to work right now.** There are almost a dozen projects that are ready and could be implemented as part of stimulus efforts or to demonstrate Forest Service commitments to local economic opportunity.



Photo Credit: Diana Portner

Subsistence and Traditional Use

Subsistence considerations cut across essentially every aspect of forest management (many already referenced above) including protection of and access to places where hunting, gathering, and foraging are important; jobs derived from forest-based activities that provide livelihoods; care for the salmon resource; and a meaningful role for Native peoples in decision-making about subsistence policies. Such considerations too often appear as an afterthought rather than being integral to how the Tongass is managed, and the Agency-used term "subsistence" sometimes misses the broader, more holistic concept of Alaska Native "ways of life", which deserves greater emphasis.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Appoint Alaska Natives in federal positions and committee seats.** For example, the Federal Subsistence Board includes a Tribal seat that is often occupied by non-Native individuals, a reality that is also often reflected by Department of Agriculture appointees in other programs.
2. **Ensure that subsistence needs are considered equally in all land management planning processes.** For example, when determining where trails and cabins should be maintained or built for recreation needs, explicitly consider implications for subsistence – which may necessitate separate or additional access to subsistence areas to minimize use conflicts or degradation of subsistence resources.

Conclusion

The opportunities outlined in this Blueprint will go a long way toward creating sustainable economic opportunities, advancing the interests of indigenous people in the region, and protecting the ecological treasure that is the Tongass National Forest. There is a great deal of support, interest, and energy across Southeast Alaska, from every interest sector, to see these opportunities realized through policy changes, more and better-targeted funding, and implementation at every level.



Photo Credit: Sheila Spores

Essentially every person and all the organizations represented in the list of contributors to the Blueprint are ready to engage in the admittedly hard work of making change happen – including sitting around collaborative tables, researching options, hammering out details, reaching for consensus on the tricky aspects, and conducting advocacy outreach. The people who live, play, and work in Southeast Alaska are eager to help write the new story and bring it to life “on the ground” in the Tongass National Forest and across the region.

It is also true that there are controversies and unresolved issues upon which there is little or no agreement. These will continue to demand time and energy from decision makers. Nevertheless, an important premise of this Blueprint endeavor – focusing on common ground and shared interests – is a belief that it can help diffuse some of the dysfunctionality, and wasted time and energy, that comes from acrimony and litigious debate on a few high-profile concerns that may in the end have relatively little influence on either people’s lives or the ecological health of the Forest.

The Roadless Rule is one of those issues. Most of the contributors to the Blueprint would prefer the roadless rule controversy to be deemphasized in favor of actionable steps to implement the recommendations detailed above.

For now, our hope is that leadership at all levels of the USDA and the Forest Service, in conjunction with non-governmental organizations, private sector partners, Tribal governments, State and local agencies, and elected officials, will take assertive action to meet today’s challenges with tomorrow’s solutions. We are optimistic that the will, wisdom, and resources exist to create a brighter and more sustainable future for the Tongass National Forest and the people who call Southeast Alaska home.

Appendix A: Blueprint Process and Interviewees

This document represents a compilation of input received from a diversity of individuals, listed here. The Blueprint does *not* represent consensus among those that provided input, and the individuals who provided input did so on a personal basis, not necessarily speaking on behalf of their associated organizations. The ultimate responsibility for what is included in the Blueprint rests with the facilitation team – Connie Lewis and Diana Portner, who are affiliated with the Meridian Institute. The content was informed by information compiled through interviews, email input, and outcomes of other regional collaborative processes. The charge of the facilitation team was to accurately capture the input of all who contributed as fairly and comprehensively as possible. They received feedback on multiple iterations of the draft document from a diversity of key stakeholders and offered review by all interviewees to ensure that all voices were included. The Nature Conservancy provided funding for the initiative but had no influence on the content other than providing input as an interviewee.

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Linda Behnken, Alaska Longline Fisheries Association
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Anthony Mallott, Sealaska
Julia Nave, The Nature Conservancy
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