

VICTORY FOR THE TONGASS RAINFOREST



Wounds of the Tongass rainforest at Prince of Wales Island

On March 7, a federal judge in Anchorage ruled in favor of the Organized Village of Kake and conservation groups in reinstating the roadless rule on the 7 million hectare (17 million acre) Tongass National Forest. The judge's ruling strikes down the 2003 Bush Administration's decision to "temporarily" exempt the Tongass from the national roadless rule that protects nearly 24 million hectares (60 million acres) of some of the nation's wildest areas.

Without the roadless rule in place on the Tongass, timber companies could build more roads to access Tongass old growth rainforests.

Conservation groups view this ruling as a victory for wolves, bears, salmon, tourism, and Alaska's job-producing fisheries as it means the U.S. Forest Service, aside from a handful of timber sales already in the roadless pipeline, can no longer punch roads into pristine rainforest to log centuries old trees.

The Tongass is the nation's largest national forest—the crown jewel of the temperate rainforest network—and one of the world's last remaining relatively intact rainforests. Roughly one-third of the world's temperate old growth is scattered across thousands of islands rimming the coastline of Alaska's southeast panhandle. Here, giant spruce trees seem to penetrate the clouds, wolves stalk unsuspecting black-tailed deer, and brown bears feed on wild salmon.

This is one of the last places on earth where salmon are so abundant, they line up like rush hour traffic to make their way to ancestral spawning grounds.

Back in the early 1990s, I cut my intellectual teeth on the Tongass as an aspiring rainforest ecologist. I lived and basked in the verdant rainforest cataloguing the passage of giant trees headed for sawmills and the demise of old-growth wildlife dependent on this unique rainforest. Prince of Wales Island, where I did my research, was the sacrifice zone for rainforest logging as much of the island's vast rainforest was being crisscrossed by a spaghetti-network of roads peppered by a shot-gun blast of clearcuts. At the time, many of the most biologically productive rainforests on the Tongass were destined for the chopping block.

This victory on the Tongass strikes a personal chord for me that began two decades ago when I first set foot on the Tongass. The Tongass's majestic rainforest inspired me to take ecology to the next level—the halls of Congress and the White House where the future of this rainforest will someday be decided.

Although logging still is occurring on the Tongass rainforest, this decision on roadless areas limits the damage to old-growth forests already penetrated by roads. But for the Tongass rainforest to continue providing its bounty to commercial and recreational fisheries and subsistence users of wildlife, the next step in the journey must be a healing one. The Tongass has been granted a brief respite and there is light at the end of this tunnel. Hopefully, the next generation of forest management will transition out of old-growth logging and into restoration of streams and plantations, repairing and removing deteriorating roads and thinning over-stocked tree farms.

The situation on the Tongass reminds me of the heart-wrenching words of Aldo Leopold, “We live in a world of wounds.” As an ecologist, I know very well what Leopold was talking about through my journeys on the Tongass; I feel its wounds in my bones, its sap runs through my veins, and I see now how the offer of hope can be a healing one.

Source: <http://ipfieldnotes.org/victory-for-the-tongass-rainforest/>