

Letters to the Editor

Readers write: Letters to the editor, June 11, 2017

 Author: **Alaska Dispatch News**  Updated: 2 days ago  Published 2 days ago

Fight to keep public lands public

I'll state my biases first, as I think you should know why I care about public land. I was born and raised in Juneau, lucky enough to be surrounded by the Tongass National Forest. I, like hundreds of thousands of Alaskans, hike, camp, hunt, fish, and otherwise recreate on public lands. Access to that level of freedom is why many of us live here. Also, like many Alaskans, my primary sources of income are a direct product of undeveloped public lands. I am in my seventh season of guiding visitors on fly-fishing trips in the Tongass, and in two weeks I will begin my fifth season of commercial gillnetting, during which I will harvest salmon from the watersheds of the Tongass.

I have visited and lived enough places outside of Alaska to know that our wealth of public land is unique and rare. I hope that this fact was not lost on Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke during his trip to Denali National Park last month. With over 224 million acres of Alaska being comprised of federal public lands, I'm sure he is aware of the value of these pristine wilderness areas to our state. It's no secret that federal public land in Alaska supports our bountiful commercial, sport and subsistence fisheries, as well as the tourism and recreation industries, which in turn create thousands of jobs and generate billions for the state economy. These industries will thrive in perpetuity, provided that decision-makers ensure there are public lands for these businesses and individuals to operate and recreate on, and that the habitat necessary to support our valuable fisheries is protected.

We don't need to look far to see the attempts to erode our access to these lands. The reality is that we have less than we once did, and next year there will likely be less than there is today. My ask is this: Keep public lands in public hands. Privatizing public lands or giving federal lands to states would undercut huge sectors of our economy, is poor public policy, and should be avoided at all costs. I hope Secretary Zinke and other decision-makers hear that message loud and clear and will join me and the some 2,200 individuals and over 300 businesses which have signed on in support of public lands at www.americansalmonforest.org/public-lands-sign-on-supporters.html.

I also ask that you, the reader, reach out to your representatives at all levels of government; local, state, and federal. Articulate to them the importance of public land in your life. Take ownership of the things you care about and ensure the preservation of Alaska's sustainable economies and way of life.

— *Sommers Cole*
Juneau