



THE CONSERVATIONIST

STANDING UP FOR OUR RIGHT TO THE OUTDOORS

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Fishing in the Salmon Forest, Part 1: The Lifeblood of the Tongass

By Hal Herring

Editor's note: Conservationist blogger Hal Herring spent five days exploring and fishing Alaska's Tongass National Forest earlier this month. This is the first of five reports.



Glacier

feeding the Taku River. Photo by Chris Hunt.

In this misty, twilight country, the sharp lines we know in the more settled world blur and shift and disappear. The line between land and water goes first--at midmorning's high tide, we thrash along in waders through neck high grass at the border of a placid saltwater estuary, mosquitoes whining, gnats in a dervish dance around our heads. By low tide at late afternoon, the saltwater has withdrawn, replaced as if by magic by an ether-clear torrent of freshwater born in the forested mountains that tower above, flowing over clean gravels as wildly colored as gemstones. The rain falls silently, sifting into the river, sky and water blended.



The salmon, mighty pinks and chums, splash on their redds, churn and roll in the eddies, rip upstream in packs, sending up roostertails of clear water, with a sound like the very fabric of the low sky itself tearing open. It could be said that everything here, from the black earth up, is made of salmon. From the colossal brown bears lounging with piles of captured salmon in the rich stink of their grassbeds, to the ruby colored salmon berries that hang over them, to the mighty Sitka spruces almost buried in shrouds of gray moss to the impassable tangles of alder, devil's club and cow parsnip. All existence here depends on the wild summer passion-play in the rivers, the spawning and dying of big fish who've lived unimaginable lives in the deep blue saltwater, in the company of killer whales and great white sharks, fish who have eaten a hundred thousand times their own weight in oily hooligan and capelin, charging themselves with the power of the sea and restoring it to the forests, just as they restore their own kind in a scatter of milt and buttery orange eggs in the very creek where they themselves were born.



American flag flying at Taku Glacier Lodge with the Taku River in the background. Photo by Chris Hunt.

This is southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest, almost 17 million acres of forested mountains, fjords, massive glaciers and wild rivers and creeks. It's called The Salmon Forest for a reason. Of the places in the world where wild salmon survive, the Tongass waters reign supreme--they produce an estimated 24 percent of all the salmon commercially harvested in Alaska, 30 percent of all the salmon that find their way hundreds of miles south to the west coast of the Lower 48. It is a billion dollar industry supporting 10,000 jobs, which requires only the basic investment of protecting the wild forests that in turn protect the wild rivers and streams that produce the bounty.

Such is the goal of Trout Unlimited's [Tongass 77 campaign](#)—create legal and permanent protection for the 77 most critical salmon-spawning watersheds on the Tongass National Forest. The effort is rooted in the basic integration of practical economics: Protect the beating heart of a vibrant commercial salmon economy, and you'll have—forever—the booming recreational fishing economy and an extraordinary quality of life in an extraordinary part of America. The Tongass is the finest kind of public lands: big, bountiful, free and untamed.

Trout Unlimited invited a group of Lower 48 fishermen to come to Juneau, Alaska, and explore the fishing, the forests, and the community of the Tongass for a week in late July. Grab your rain gear, bear spray, and a good stout 7-weight fly rod that you don't mind breaking, and come along.



Trout

Unlimited's Mark Kaelke of Juneau releases a nice chum caught on a Clouser Minnow. Photo by Earl Harper, Earl Harper Studios.