

My Turn: Forest Service must prioritize recreation programs, protecting wild places

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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

As tourism and recreation businesses in Southeast Alaska are preparing for our upcoming travel season. Congress is debating national forest management policy and the Forest Service is amending its land management plan for the Tongass National Forest.

Decision-makers have an opportunity to support the growing travel industry by prioritizing Forest Service recreation programs and protecting wild places, while also assuring reasonable access for our citizens and visitors. Tourism has become a major economic driver for Southeast Alaska, bringing over 1 million people from around the world to see this national treasure each year. More and more people are exploring remote places. The Tongass is home to many hidden coves and lush valleys, where wild salmon support a forest full of iconic wildlife.

Tourism and recreation are serious businesses in Southeast Alaska. According to the Southeast Conference and the McDowell Group, businesses like mine employ 6,700 people and inject more than \$1 billion into the local economy each year.

Un-Cruise Adventures, we have found that people want to go further, dive deeper and get closer to this thriving national forest. We pride ourselves on getting folks active and hands-on with wild Alaska. Ensuring that there are undeveloped, healthy ecosystems in the Tongass is key to a memorable experience for our guests. However, this means we need protection, trails and access to these pristine areas (via a reasonable permit system) in order to meet the traveling public's increased demands for authentic experiences in the Tongass.

Personally meet our small passenger ships at the end of each journey in order to hear directly from our guests. Our passengers (22-84 guests, depending on the ship) are so enthusiastic that they can't help but share with me the incredible places they have been and wild animals they have seen in their 7-21 days in the Tongass.

A brown bear is one of the most exciting animals that we get to see. These massive coastal grizzlies are spectacular to see up close — a beautiful and iconic symbol of Alaska. Thanks to healthy wild salmon populations and high-quality habitat, the Tongass has some of the highest densities of brown bears in the world. The wild and undeveloped salmon streams that bears need are exactly the kinds of places that we want our guests to have the opportunity to explore.

I'm ecstatic to see high-quality fish habitat and undeveloped landscapes protected in this plan. This will ensure that we can bring groups ashore to enjoy the raw experience that our passengers expect and we all enjoy. The high-quality fish habitat and the undeveloped landscapes of the Tongass is not only good for the health and vitality of its wildlife, but it will boost the region's economy by ensuring that businesses like mine and the guests we serve are never left wanting for the raw, wild experiences that define the Alaska we all cherish.

Dan Blanchard is the owner and CEO of Un-Cruise Adventures, a wholly-owned subsidiary of InnerSea Discoveries Alaska Inc., in Juneau.

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