

My Turn: Why conservation of the Tongass matter

Posted: March 21, 2016 - 12:00am

By [ALAN CORBETT](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Last week, I was part of a small group that travelled from Southeast Alaska to Washington D.C. to draw attention to efforts by the American Salmon Forest Coalition to conserve the Tongass 77 (T77), a collection of over 70 high-value salmon watersheds in the Tongass National Forest.

While our group was small, we represented a diverse set of interests, including a Juneau-based guide outfitter who operates fly-out fishing and bear viewing trips under a Tongass National Forest special use permit for many areas in Southeast Alaska, including several of the T77 areas, a commercial gillnetter who relies directly on healthy salmon runs to sustain his business, and myself a charter boat captain. You may well be wondering why I, as a boat captain, was moved to advocate on behalf of the Tongass when the sole focus of my trips is wildlife viewing and not catching fish?

The humpback whales that my passengers come to see are inexorably linked to the Pacific salmon both directly and indirectly. After their breeding season in Hawaii the whales return to Alaska. They haven't eaten since the previous September and they begin to feed immediately. Initially they target salmon smolt in the estuaries of the Tongass as the fish transition from fresh to salt water. The salmon smolt are a vital feed source for these 40-ton monsters.

The Tongass National Forest is the issue that brought about this unlikely alliance, specifically its salmon and salmon habitat, which ultimately pays our wages and allows us to run our businesses. The T77 represents a mere 11 percent of the land area in the Tongass, yet these creeks and rivers represent a disproportionately large slice of the total available spawning and rearing habitat of the Tongass — 23 percent to be exact.

Given that salmon fisheries generate \$1 billion annually and provides 7,500 jobs (or 10 percent of the region's employment), it is easy to see why many in the commercial fishing industry are keen to see these areas conserved. Similarly, tourism relies directly on a healthy Tongass for survival.

The Tongass is the main economic driver for a tourist industry which contributes \$1 billion to the regional economy. It is also responsible for an estimated 14 percent of the region's employment. Tourists come to Southeast Alaska to go sport fishing, bear viewing, whale watching and to see an intact rainforest.

As a whale watching captain in Juneau, I operate nearly all my tours within 10 nautical miles of the estuary of Herbert River, which is included in the T77. Every day my passengers pay good money to observe seals, sea lions, eagles, orcas and humpback whales. These animals and birds benefit either directly or indirectly from having a healthy salmon habit. With tourist numbers increasing annually, it is an economic imperative to maintain the area that they are coming to see. Alaska is an experiential destination and if we remove or curtail their opportunities to experience salmon and salmon habitat, we're shooting ourselves in the foot.

Our trip to Washington D.C. was an effort to highlight the economic benefits of conserving the T77, regardless of political affiliation. The response we received was overwhelmingly positive from legislative offices on both sides of the aisle. The Alaska delegates were keen to meet with us, and we had particularly constructive talks with Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, and her staff, and the staff of Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska. I want to thank Sen. Murkowski in particular for being so generous with her time and for her careful consideration of the need to ensure Southeast Alaska's tourism and fishing industries remain robust into the future.

Moving forward, I believe that there is no reason to pick winners and losers when it comes to the commercial and recreational use of the Tongass, and specifically the T77. The key to this will be maintaining a dialogue that can include all industries and lead to economic prosperity throughout the region. However, the stark reality of the situation is that if we can't conserve the viability of our healthy salmon runs and the habitat that sustains them, and our commercial, sport and subsistence fishing, as well as tourism, all will suffer and that will negatively impact our regional economy.

The Tongass is our home, and as we move forward I feel proud to have had the opportunity advocate on its behalf.

- Alan Corbett lives on Douglas Island.