



Ashley Hegewald

# THE TONGASS 77

## Protecting Southeast Alaska's Best Salmon Watersheds

### At nearly 17 million acres, the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska

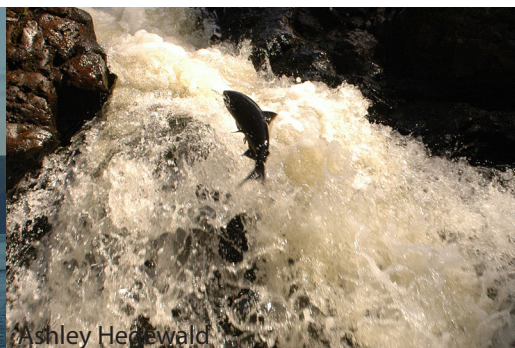
is our country's largest national forest. This magnificent landscape of western hemlock, Sitka spruce, western red cedar and yellow cedar is part of the world's largest remaining intact temperate rainforest. The Tongass comprises thousands of mist-covered islands, deep fjords, tidewater glaciers and soggy muskegs that host some of the rarest ecosystems on the planet. It is ideal habitat for a vast array of plant and animal species—

including all five species of North American Pacific salmon, steelhead and resident trout, brown and black bear, Sitka black-tailed deer, bald eagles, and wolves, among many others. The Tongass includes more than 15,700 miles of clean, undammed streams and 4,100 lakes and ponds that provide optimal spawning and rearing conditions for the region's abundant wild salmon and trout.

Each year as hundreds of millions of wild salmon return to Tongass streams to spawn and die, they bring nutrients from the North Pacific Ocean to the forest. Enriched by this annual salmon return, the Tongass literally is a



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[AmericanSalmonForest.org](http://AmericanSalmonForest.org)







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"The Tongass is America's salmon forest and one of the few places in the world where wild salmon and trout still thrive. Some 65 percent of Tongass salmon and trout habitat is not Congressionally protected at the watershed scale, and is currently open to development activities that could harm fish. It's time for Congress to better protect the richest resource of the Tongass: wild salmon."

**Mark Kaelke**  
Trout Unlimited - Alaska Program

"salmon forest" with unique ecosystems found nowhere else on Earth. Despite its stature as an internationally significant forest, 65-percent of the Tongass' salmon and trout habitat is not protected at the watershed scale. This means millions of acres of temperate Alaska rainforest are open to development activities that could permanently harm important fish and wildlife habitat.

## Culture and Economics

Salmon and trout not only sustain the plant and animal communities of the Tongass, but they also serve as the foundation for local cultures and communities. Virtually all of the roughly 75,000 people who call Southeast Alaska home depend on Tongass salmon and trout for income and employment, for cultural and ceremonial purposes, or for nutrition and recreation. For the three coastal tribes that have populated the region for many thousands

of years, salmon underpin their traditional gathering practices and form a major part of their culture.

Salmon fishing—including commercial, sport and subsistence fishing—provides nearly 11-percent of the region's jobs and contributes \$1 billion annually to the local economy. For each of the past three years, Southeast Alaska has produced the largest salmon harvest in the state, with fishermen hauling in up to 100 million salmon worth more than \$200 million a year. Tongass salmon comprise 79-percent of the annual salmon harvest from Southeast Alaska, 28-percent of the overall salmon catch for all of Alaska, and 25-percent of all salmon harvested from the North American Pacific coast—including all of Alaska, Canada, Washington, Oregon and California.

## Threats

While most salmon and trout populations in the Tongass are healthy and abundant, their future is uncertain. Industrial-scale logging and road building, new mining developments, dozens of hydroelectric dam projects, and various proposals to privatize large swathes of the most productive and valuable portions of the Tongass threaten permanent damage to the region's most valuable resource: salmon. While 35-percent of Tongass salmon and trout habitat is protected at the watershed scale, many of the most important salmon streams remain vulnerable to industrial development that can cause serious harm to the long-term



Renee Warr



productivity of fish habitat. Climate change impacts and reduced funding for research and restoration programs also are becoming more common.

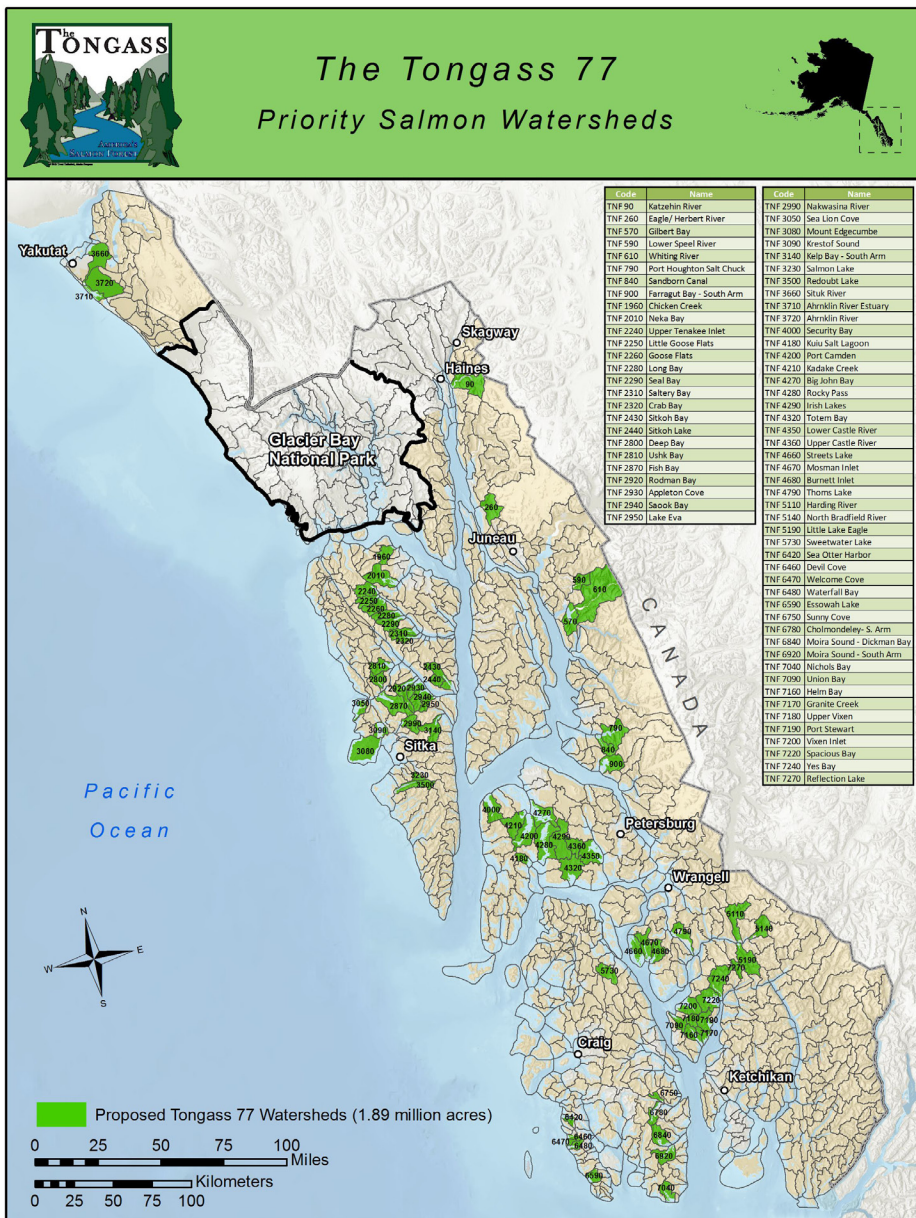
The troubled history of salmon in the Pacific Northwest and California, where wild salmon runs once rivaled Alaska's, foreshadows what could occur in Southeast Alaska unless lawmakers, government agencies and the public act to make habitat conservation and restoration top priorities. In the Tongass, we still have the opportunity to ensure salmon and trout, and the people who depend on them, enjoy a healthier and more stable future.

## Solution

Salmon and trout—and the communities, cultures and economies they sustain—require clean, healthy watersheds for spawning, rearing and migrating. Researchers from the Alaska offices of the Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited used state-of-the-art GIS and conservation planning software to identify the “best of the best” from the thousands of salmon and trout watersheds on the Tongass that currently lack watershed-scale protection. After consulting with federal and state biologists and various community and business stakeholder groups, the list was narrowed down to 77 high-value

watersheds (since reduced to 73 by intervening legislation) comprising 1.9 million acres that form the backbone of Southeast Alaska's salmon fishery and the local economy. Based on the outstanding fish habitat in these watersheds and their contributions to local communities and economies, the highest and best use of the “Tongass 77” is for salmon and trout production.

Federal legislation to permanently protect the Tongass 77 is necessary to ensure the long-term productivity of these important salmon watersheds. Maintaining natural salmon production and the health and function of fish and wildlife habitat should be the top management priorities.



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Additionally, by prohibiting commercial logging, new road building and new mining developments within the Tongass 77, we can help ensure Southeast Alaska's abundant wild salmon return for generations to come and continue to fuel the region's communities and economy.

## Scientific & Public Support

Prevailing scientific and public opinion support protecting the Tongass 77. Trout Unlimited's Alaska Program has compiled an 88-page literature review that documents the ever-expanding rationale for why conserving entire salmon watersheds from ridge tops to river mouths makes sound scientific sense. The report shows that full-scale watershed protection is the best way to preserve both habitat diversity and natural processes so critical to salmon and trout.

The Nature Conservancy polled Alaskans and found a majority of them overwhelmingly support policies that protect salmon habitat across Alaska. Ninety-six percent of Alaskans surveyed said salmon are essential to the Alaskan way of life, and 97-percent said salmon are an important part of the Alaskan economy. Statewide, 89-percent of Alaskans stated that even in tough economic times it is important to maintain funding for salmon conservation. More at [www.americansalmonforest.org/science](http://www.americansalmonforest.org/science).

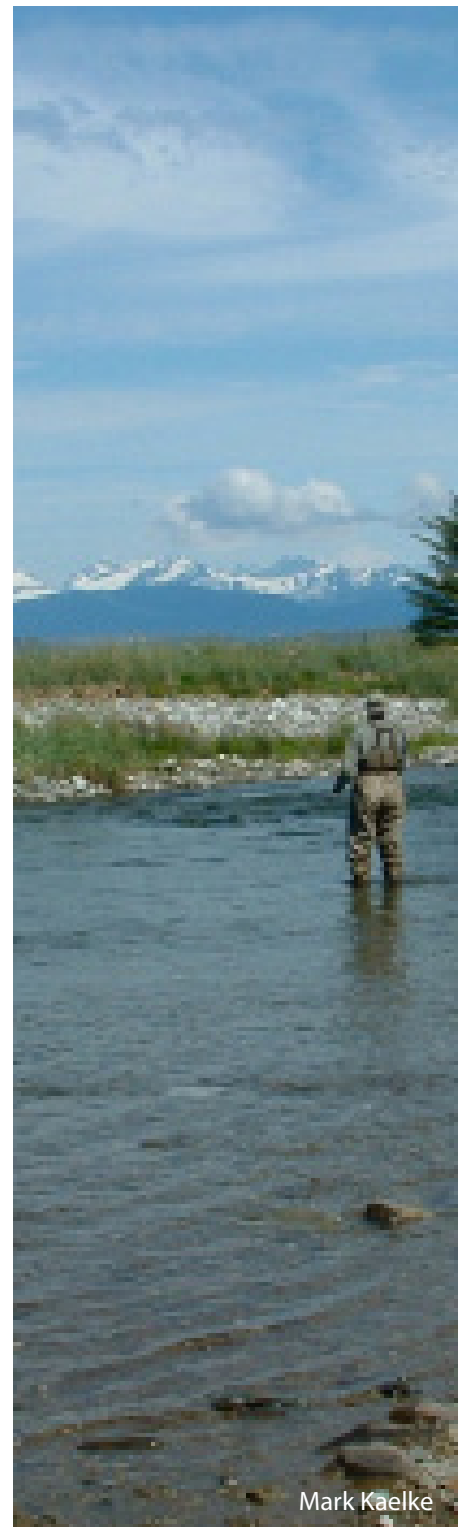
## YOU CAN HELP

Whether you fish for salmon and trout, eat them or just like knowing they're out there, you can be part of the solution.

## CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR.



Congress needs to know you support "The Tongass 77."  
Please sign our open letter to Congress at  
[AmericanSalmonForest.org/sign-on](http://AmericanSalmonForest.org/sign-on)



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## Alaska Program

We work to conserve, protect and restore wild salmon and trout populations throughout Alaska. TU's vision for the Tongass National Forest includes permanent conservation designations for high-value salmon and trout watersheds, as well as the implementation of a comprehensive plan for restoring fish passage and impacted watersheds throughout the region. These actions will sustain and enrich the vital economic and social contributions of salmon and trout to Southeast Alaska.

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