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Fishing in the Salmon Forest, Part 5: The Lust for Timber vs. the Need for Forest

*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 last of [five reports](#).*



*A Ward Air floatplane lands in the Tongass National Forest. Photo by Earl Harper, Earl Harper Studios.*

President Theodore Roosevelt created what would become the Tongass National Forest in 1902, when he used the executive power of the 1891 Forest Reserve Act to establish the Alexander Archipelago Reserve in 1902. It would become the Tongass National Forest in 1907, when the “reserves” were renamed. The Tongass was part of the grand overarching plan for our National Forests, a system of productive public lands that would forever protect the one thing no nation could survive without: water. But as with so many well-meaning government efforts, the ever-variable human factor wormed its way into the Tongass, as I believe it has into every land-conservation effort in history, in every part of the world.

In 1947, Congress passed the Tongass Timber Act to prioritize logging in the public-land forests of southeast Alaska. It was an odd plan; even its boosters knew that the logging industry, unsupported by government subsidy, had tried many times and failed to turn a profit here. Instead, the plan was to establish, by government mandate and with eternal public subsidy (which included a never-ending supply of timber), an industry that would bring in population and provide them with secure jobs.

“This was a federal experiment to settle this region,” said Paula Dobbyn, a veteran journalist who reported on business, environment, fisheries and other issues across Alaska before joining Trout Unlimited as Communications Director for Alaska in 2009. “The goal was to create a timber economy here even though it would not be economically viable. In the 1940s, one of the goals was to establish a supply of timber to help re-build post-war Japan. The rest of it was a Cold War idea--build towns, create jobs, populate these outer areas.” (The old USSR built several of these, including the Stalin-era [“worker’s paradise” of Neft Dashlari](#), on an oil discovery 34 kilometers out on the Caspian Sea.)

As government programs will, the timber economy plan took on its own momentum, expanding in the 1950s, with pulp mills built at Ketchikan and Sitka, each given a 50-year contract to harvest timber from the Tongass. Logging accelerated during each succeeding decade, until controversy erupted over the scale and impacts of the operations in the late 1980s and early 90s.

With the settlement of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Native corporations were awarded a half-million acres of the Tongass National Forest, and logging on those lands exploded. By the early 1990s almost all productive forest lands awarded by the settlement were denuded of marketable timber, with most of it exported to Asia, adding fuel to the fire of controversy over the plans to continue logging the Tongass. The timber industry and the workers that depended on it experienced the roller-coaster effects of global supply and demand coupled with new laws and policies meant to protect the other resources of the forest. Today, as might be expected, there is controversy over what remains of the old growth forests on the Tongass, and over what remains of the strongest ecosystems that produce the fisheries.



*Hal*

*Herring with nice Dolly Varden taken on a Tenkara rod and bead. Photo by Earl Harper, Earl Harper Studios.*

But it's hard to concentrate on that controversy when you're braced hip-deep in a big fast-water creek 35 miles south of Juneau, bowed up on a 22-inch Dolly Varden. I'm still throwing the little bead egg, and we are definitively into the big Dollies that we were promised existed "out there, way out there." Not every cast, mind you, and not every fish, but right here in these shallow runs, with the chums and pinks charging around you, there are big wildly speckled char that sock the bead and double the rod and strip line and go straight into the air like bright silver missiles.

We came here on a midmorning floatplane flight with the excellent Ward Air service, and the Juneau-based guide Mark Hieronymous, of Bear Creek Outfitters, who commutes to his guide work almost daily on the Ward planes. It's a testimony to the enduring attraction of southeast Alaska for a certain kind of adventurer that you can't swing a cat around here without hitting a fishing guide with both a lot of education and a background in commercial salmon fishing. Mark is no exception--he has a degree in fisheries science and aquaculture, and he started out working the boats, then started a business that processed salmon roe. He sold that operation a few years ago, and now divides his time between working for Trout Unlimited and full-time guiding during the season. He's got about 40 years of experience behind a fly rod, and he still fishes as if every cast were his last. He is obsessed, in the best possible way, with fish and water and all the mysteries therein. He's guiding us, but it's a friendly trip, too, so he's fishing his tail off. And watching him connect with some very big Dollies, I'm learning how to fish this place.

I drift away up a side channel, a sinuous little braid enclosed by head-high grass and alders. It's not safe--the smell of bear is everywhere, but Mark was up here a few minutes ago, and from the bank, you can see pretty far upstream. It's like fishing a tiny creek back home in Montana, with big scour holes near overhanging banks, and a series of shoals, except that there are three foot long chum salmon everywhere, and way more bear sign. I drop the bead rig directly behind a couple of spawning fish and let it tumble along the gravels (I've added a split shot, BB-sized, a foot above the bead). This time, I'm so close that I see the flash of the Dolly as it hits the bead, and I rear back on the rod to set the hook. The fish flies off the gravel shoal and bores down into the scour hole, abandons that route and comes straight out of the water going downstream. I'm holding on, putting a lot of pressure on the heavy leader, bound to stop the fish from going around the corner to the main creek. It's no real contest--it's an 18-or 19-inch fish--but as I bring it to hand and jerk the little hook out of its jaw, I feel pure glory raining down all around me. To be alone here, on this braid, in this valley, with all these fish, is like a dream. I take off my sunglasses and put them on my hat--the day is already dark enough, and I'm not obsessively seeking the next fish, at least for a few minutes. On my next cast, I stick the hook in a big chum that I did not see, and it moves inexorably upstream to a log jam. I point the rod at it, lock one hand over the reel, and feel the line pop a few inches above the bead. Game over for the time being.

The day passed, as the best of days do, too fast. We are back at the landing site for the floatplane by 3 in the afternoon, still casting to pods of passing salmon and to some of those renegade Dollies that forsake the egg bounty and prowl down here in the salt for baitfish. It's very, very hard to quit fishing. The whine of the floatplane coming in was a kind of mournful sound.

Our trip to the Tongass was not over. We had a day left to fish around Juneau, and we made the most of it, fishing Dollies and pinks in a small creek where I spied a brilliantly colored summer steelhead hovering in an eddy behind a boulder. I used a Tenkara rod to torment him with a Clouser until he finally swam away in apparent disgust. Later, I'd ask Mark Hieronymous if it was possible that what I'd seen was actually a steelhead. "Yes," he replied, "you can never tell what you'll see up in these creeks this time of year."

That answer, to me, summed up what I think is most powerful about the Tongass, and the experience of fishing there. The seas are big and rowdy and dangerous. The bugs can be bad. The bears are there; they are big, irritable, and the woods and thickets are such that you never can be sure that they are not right there, about to be irritable with you. You are fishing in a place where killer whales eat seals like you and I would eat a Milk Dud, not far from where you are standing, casting so hopefully. There are fish everywhere.

You never know what will happen next.