

Wrangell recovers from its timber hangover

Can a small Alaska town overcome the booms and busts of resource development?

Krista Langlois June 18, 2015 *Web Exclusive*

“The Wrangell village was a rough place. No mining hamlet in the placer gulches of California, nor any backwoods village I ever saw, approached it in picturesque, devil-may-care abandon. It was a lawless draggle of wooden huts and houses, built in crooked lines, wrangling around the boggy shore of the island for a mile or so...” -John Muir, *Travels in Alaska*, 1915

The low clouds hugging Woronofski Island are just beginning to burn off as the *Chutine Warrior* leaves the port of Wrangell, Alaska, and begins zooming north toward the Stikine River delta. “My name is Jim Leslie and I am gonna be your captain today,” says Jim Leslie, a big guy with a sandy goatee and wavy hair. “We’re gonna be looking for wildlife, and we’re gonna be looking at incredible scenery. The Stikine is the fastest free-flowing river in North America.”

The ten passengers hanging onto Leslie's every word are all white, all retirement age, and all adorned with some sort of camera — a smartphone, GoPro, or DSLR with a lens weighing more than a small dog. As we head into the 20-mile-wide delta, weaving between grassy sandbars and into thickly-vegetated sloughs, we pass a floathouse where a man and his son are getting nets ready for fishing. The tourists lean out the boat windows, snapping pictures. The man and his son avert their eyes.

This is what the new economy of Southeast Alaska looks like. Leslie, who used to make millions and employ 75 people felling timber in the Tongass National Forest, is now extolling the virtues of wilderness to visitors from Los Angeles and Sydney. When a combination of federal mandates and environmental pressure caused the timber industry to go belly-up in 1992, Leslie — like many of his neighbors in a place once known as the Timber Capital of Alaska — lost everything. The mills closed, and Wrangell's unemployment shot up to 35 percent. "I was bitter when the timber industry collapsed," he says later. "My future was set and so was that of my children, and at the age of 44, it was all gone."

In the decades that followed, many in Southeast Alaska struggled to revive the mills and timber sales. Yet today, nearly everyone I talk to is resigned to the fact that [timber isn't coming back](#): Only 30 million board feet come from the Tongass each year, compared to more than 520 million at its peak. There's some nostalgia for the excesses timber once conferred (and residual anger at the federal government and outside environmentalists for its loss), but like Leslie, the town has largely moved on. Now, the big question is how to recover from the timber hangover.

There's no easy answer. Some former timber towns in the region are banking on commercial fishing, while others have tied their fortunes to

tourism — or more specifically, to the giant floating buffets that cruise up and down the Inside Passage, offloading thousands of tourists onto Main Streets redesigned to meet their needs. Yet the main drag in Wrangell still sells marine hardware instead of chintzy shot glasses, and there's nary a zipline to be seen. Instead, in a state where communities have historically been dependent on a single resource — and subject to its associated booms and busts — Wrangell seems to be limping toward the holy grail of economic development: a diversified economy.

To see for myself what this looks like, Leslie suggested that after taking a ride up the Stikine River with his small tourism company, Alaska Waters, I wander over to the Marine Travel Services Center.

Colloquially known as the shipyard, the center is owned by the city and presided over by Don Sorric, who owns a boat-repair company called Superior Marine. Along with a nearby fish processing plant and the town's modest tourism sector, Superior Marine and the shipyard have become the main drivers of Wrangell's new economy.

When I first meet Sorric, he's being interviewed for a new reality TV show, the details of which I promised not to divulge. He doesn't so much arrive on-scene as he explodes into it, driving up fast in a truck with a Grateful Dead sticker on the window, a drink in one hand, and a cigarette in the other.

A former fisherman who helped start up the shipyard after sinking three of his own shoddily-repaired boats, Sorric now employs ten people. He complains that he hates working in the shipyard, that he'd rather be fishing; and in the same breath says that Wrangell's economy is coming out of the dumps and he's proud to be part of it. To be fair, neither Leslie's tourist operation nor Sorric's comes anywhere close to

providing what the timber industry once did. Thirty years ago, Leslie's employees each made \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year cutting down trees, plus full benefits and a retirement package. His current employees (including a former timber worker turned professional rodeo cowboy turned fly fishing guide) are seasonal workers who spend most of the year unemployed.

Nonetheless, this is the future, and on a sunny Monday morning, it looks bright. A handful of tourists walk down the sidewalk, while in the shipyard, amidst piles of net and stacks of crab pots, men are hard at work welding, painting, stripping and sanding. From his trailer office, Sorric surveys the scene. "I'd say," he says, "that we're doing alright."

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