



Sierra Borealis

alaska report

SIERRA CLUB ALASKA CHAPTER

JUNE 2010



GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION FOR ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

June 7 Deadline to comment on its new Plan

The Arctic National Wildlife turns 50 years old this year, and there are many reasons why this extraordinary place deserves celebration as one of our nation's natural treasures -- on par with the vastness of the Grand Canyon and the richness of Yellowstone.

On December 6, 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower first established the Arctic National Wildlife Range for its "unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values." But the Range, expanded in 1980 and renamed "Refuge" also has something more that's unique, and no one said it better than wilderness visionary Margaret Murie as she described the Arctic Refuge many years ago:

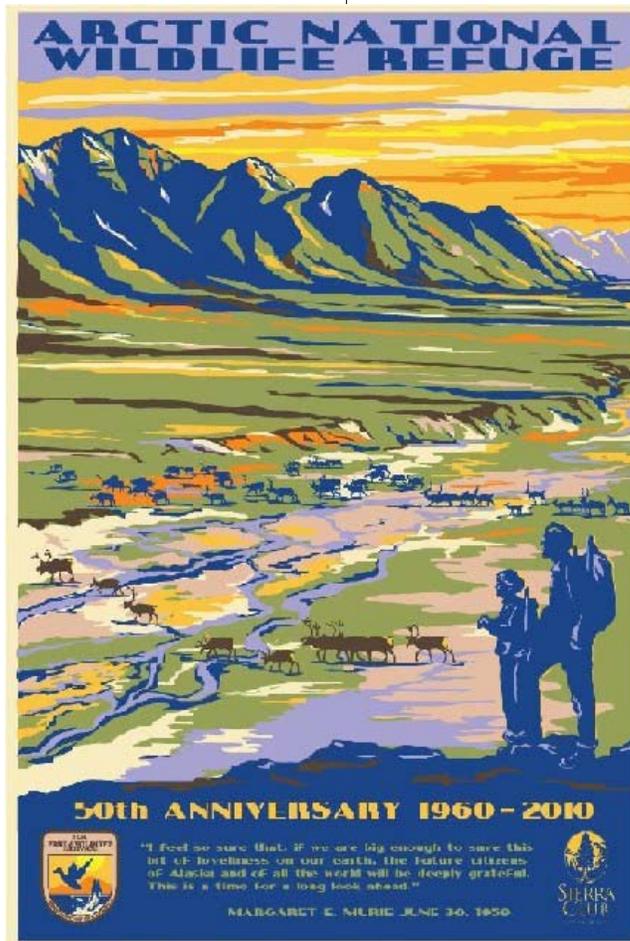
"This area was to provide critical habitat for *endangered experiences* -- experiences that should be the right of every generation.

But its greater contributions to the future may be symbolic: an encouraging legacy of restraint. The Arctic Refuge stands as the commitment of the past generations to all succeeding generations - that America's finest example of the world we did not alter or control will be passed on, undiminished."

In the Arctic Refuge and its contested 1.5 million-acre Coastal Plain, we have a story of the modern demands of our nation's fossil fuel addiction clashing directly with the best example of our intact arctic ecological heritage. That has been the fundamental debate for decades, and here we find ourselves ever so closer to the precipice of climate catastrophe. The debate rages on, now intimately intertwined into the broader choice of what we are willing to do with our atmospheric commons.

Celebrate by commenting NOW on new Refuge Conservation Plan

During this 50th anniversary year of the Arctic Refuge, we have a golden opportunity to promote wilderness protection via the Comprehensive Conservation Plan the U.S. Fish *-- continued next page*



and Wildlife Service is preparing to guide management of the Arctic Refuge for the next 15 years. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is undertaking a two-year management review of the refuge that includes one of the most controversial conservation questions of our time: Should the agency recommend that Congress designate more of the refuge as wilderness, including the coastal plain? Those of us taking the long view know that the responsible answer is yes.

Comment NOW on scoping for the Refuge CCP

We have the historic opportunity to comment on the scoping period of this CCP comment period through June 7th, and a year later we will have the draft of the revised CCP. With proper public support throughout the scoping and draft process, we can make a historical precedent of having the USFWS recommend the Coastal Plain as wilderness. This would be a huge step towards potential wilderness designation.

As we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Arctic Refuge we must further strive to have this place become the chief symbol of the Obama's administration conservation legacy. Imagine what a fully protected Arctic Refuge could do to for our overall national conservation agenda, the way it could put another foothold into the conservation and clean energy economy. Having the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommend the coastal plain as being designated wilderness would be the opening paragraph of a national statement that we will restrain ourselves from destroying our nation's only example of a fully functioning arctic ecosystem. It would be a proud and clear declaration that our nation plans on moving to a clean energy economy as quickly as possible.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge remains a shining symbol of the choices we have for the future. Its 50th Anniversary and Refuge CCP revision remind us that it



photo: Sierra Club Wayburn archives

Help guide management of Arctic Refuge rivers like the South Slope's Sheenjek--shown on a float trip by the Wayburns and Jack Hession in 1990.

always takes concerned citizens to lead our country forward. Commenting on the CCP gives us that great opportunity.

⇒ WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Send your comments by June 7! Here are some suggested talking points to put *into your own words*:

**Urge that *all* non-wilderness portions of the Refuge be reviewed for wilderness eligibility, including the Coastal Plain, and that the agency recommend significant new wilderness. (Presently, 8 million acres--about 40 percent--of the 19 million acre-Refuge is designated Wilderness.)

** The plan should acknowledge the intrinsic value of all indigenous animals and plants in their natural diversity; thus there should be no predator "control" to increase game animals.

** The plan should safeguard age-old subsistence opportunities, utilizing the natural ecosystem, according to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

** Recreation opportunities that provide challenging adventure, discovery, exploration and solitude should get top priority – subject to preservation of the wilderness qualities, both tangible and intangible. The agency should not make travel "safe" or "convenient" for visitors.

** Agency presence should be as unobtrusive as possible, and no "facilities" such as cabins, trails, bridges, etc should be allowed in wilderness.

** Airplanes are permitted to land for access, but should not be allowed for game spotting and should be discouraged for flight-seeing. Airboats, jet boats and helicopters should *not* be allowed for public access.

** The plan should focus on the special value of this Refuge's undisturbed ecosystems for studying and understanding effects of climate change in the Arctic, Scientific activities must remain unobtrusive, avoid disturbing wildlife, and not allow habitat manipulation. And the plan must protect the integrity of the Refuge from extra impacts due to anticipated increased shipping and cruise ship use on Alaska's north coast as Arctic seas warm.

Pick a few of these points to mention -- in your own words -- and add more ideas of your own!

To submit comments online by June 7th for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan go to <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/alaska/ccp1c.cfm>

For more information about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process go here: <http://arctic.fws.gov/ccp.htm> ♦

-- Kit McGurn, Arctic organizer

Editor's note: At the Alaska State Fair in Palmer Aug. 26 - Sept. 6, 2010, Friends of Alaska Refuges will staff an "Arctic 50th booth". Check it out...

Obama Administration puts off Arctic Offshore Drilling

Thanks to an outpouring of messages from Sierra Club activists and our allies across the country, the Obama administration announced in late May they would delay Shell's Oil's planned Arctic Ocean drilling for at least 1 year. The decision halts permit approvals for new exploratory drilling this summer in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas and directly affects Shell, which had almost final authorization to drill new exploratory wells there.

This is a welcome and critically important short-term move, but it won't solve the underlying problems caused by our reliance on oil. The Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico reminds us that the price of America's excessive driving in private cars is the constant risk of environmental devastation from offshore drilling and other petroleum industry effects.

Ironically, as skimmers and fishing boats scrambled in the Gulf to try to keep the oil from shore, another fleet prepared to set sail --to drill in America's Arctic Ocean for more oil. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar had authorized exploratory drilling in the fragile arctic waters in less than 60 days. The Minerals Management Service--the same Interior Department agency that okayed BP's Gulf drilling project with no environmental review--stated that a large spill in the Arctic could have terrible consequences, but that the chance of such a spill is "too remote and speculative an event" to warrant analysis.

Remote arctic Alaska is one of the wildest spots left on the globe. I have been fortunate to spend time here -- to watch walrus gather on ice floes, puffins "fly" through the water, and polar bears prowl the ice edge. I have traveled



with Alaska Native people and listened as they describe their connections to this land and importance of these animals to their age-old culture.

A major spill could leave oil in these waters for decades, killing whales, seals, and fish, and bringing to an end Alaska Natives'

ancient way of life. The Arctic is already paying the price for our fossil fuel habit. Northern Alaska is warming at twice the rate of the Lower 48. North Slope people face the impacts every day--in loss of sea ice, changes in animal abundance and behavior, and the diminished subsistence opportunities. Now big oil wants to add offshore drilling to the impacts.

Should an oil spill happen here in the Arctic, the response capabilities are a small fraction of what is proving inadequate in the Gulf. There, within 24 hours, 32 spill-response vehicles, 1 million feet of containment boom, and at least six firefighting vessels mustered. In a similar situation in the Chukchi Sea, there would be only 13 spill-response vehicles, less than 3,000 feet of containment boom, and a single firefighting system. And both the federal government and industry admit that oil spill response doesn't work in the arctic during much of the year.

Shell Oil says a blowout of the kind that occurred in the Gulf would be unlikely in the Arctic Ocean because there

Should an oil spill happen in the Arctic, the response capabilities are a small fraction of what is proving inadequate in the Gulf.

drilling would be in shallower water and thus at lower well pressures. Shell is wrong. Shallower water does not make a blowout less likely. And, with a response capacity known even before drilling to be non-existent in the Arctic, it is, if anything, more risky to drill in the Arctic than in the Gulf.

To end the oil industry's reign of self-regulation and profiteering, BP must be held fully responsible for negligence, the government must stop subsidizing these polluting companies, and there must be a massive new effort to move America away from oil dependence. We can embrace 21st century renewable energy solutions that make cars go farther, prioritize public transportation, promote conservation, and protect our natural heritage.

The Arctic--for now--is vibrant and alive. When I visit the Arctic coast this summer I'll see sandpipers that have flown over the Gulf oil spill on their return to their summer home where they will hatch a new generation. ♦

-- Dan Ritzman

Arctic 50th gets Agency Fanfare

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages America's national wildlife refuge system, is highlighting the 50th anniversary of this premiere refuge -- the system's largest -- with a major celebratory and educational initiative. The Service states in its brochure entitled "Celebrating our 50th Anniversary":

"We will use the important milestone of the 50th Anniversary of the Arctic Refuge to expand people's understanding of what the Refuge is and that it is part of a Refuge System. We anticipate our communications will provoke public discussion over issues of energy, climate change, and species' extinction, and that is altogether fitting because these topics represent the greatest challenges facing the Service, the Refuge System, and the Arctic itself...we will showcase the enduring values this place has preserved and honor its founders and their vision,..."

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge sent staffer Roger Kaye to Berkeley, CA, in April, to give a plenary presentation on the significance of the 50th anniversary at Western Wilderness Conference 2010.

Dirty Coal Waste Disposal in Alaska

Since Christmas Day 2008 when a coal ash slurry impoundment dam ruptured in Kingston, Tennessee, tragically burying nearby homes and poisoning the Clinch River with heavy metals, much scrutiny has fallen on the disposal practices of coal combustion wastes (CCW) across the nation. Alaska is no exception.

Last fall the Alaska Chapter began investigating where Alaska's dirty coal waste has been disposed of over the decades. We evaluated the State's regulations and studied records on CCW disposal. After the snow melted this spring we were able to find and inspect several dump sites in the Fairbanks area by simply following dump trucks of steaming ash from the power plants to their dumping destinations. What we discovered has led us to "dig deeper" to seek more comprehensive information.

Interior Alaska has six coal-fired power plants which collectively produce 135.5 megawatts (MW) of electricity and range in size from 8 MW to 28.5 MW. These are relatively small compared to most coal-fired power plants in the Lower 48, yet significant to their locations. All of their fuel comes from Alaska's Usibelli coal mine in Healy just outside Denali National Park. Alaska's low-grade coal is inefficient and produces toxic waste streams – most notably CO₂ and mercury -- released through the smokestacks to the winds, and also as heavy metals concentrated in solid waste in the form of CCW. In Alaska this dirty coal waste is officially referred to as Coal Combustion Byproducts (CCB) and receives very little State oversight in its disposal and/or reuse. But the Alaska Chapter is taking notice.

Landfills and contaminated water

Four of the coal-fired power plants have designated landfills for their CCW, and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) provided us with their inspection reports and images of these landfills. Three of the landfills are on military bases, and one is in Healy near Denali National Park at the coal mine. In the Lower 48, investigations of unlined CCW landfills such as these have revealed widespread groundwater contamination. The newly released Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) disposal rules will require landfills to have impermeable liners and permanent leachate monitoring systems to prevent groundwater contamination.

The other two coal fired power plants are inside Fairbanks city limits. The 28.5 MW Aurora Energy, LLC (a subsidiary of Usibelli Coal Mine) coal-fired power plant is on the banks of the Chena River in downtown Fairbanks. This power plant has no designated disposal site. This power plant has neither scrubbers or "baghouse" to capture particulate emissions, so the most toxic and mobile particulates go to the winds. Fairbanks has experienced

severe air quality problems regularly. It is often at unhealthy levels and in violation of Clean Air Act standards for public health. Wildfires are common in the Interior's hot dry summers, and pollution trapping inversions occur often in their long, cold winters. Wood burning and coal burning for residential heat and auto emissions have been identified as the primary culprits, but the two smoke and particle belching coal-fired power plants in the middle of the city obviously compound the problem. With ever-rising fuel oil prices and cheap and stable coal prices many folks are continuing to convert to residential coal boilers for heat, producing ever-more dirty coal ash air emissions.

The decades-old fluidized bed coal boiler in downtown Fairbanks produces a material called boiler slag rather than the more common fly ash produced by more modern coal fired power plants. We learned that this riverside power plant has a contractor to dispose of its CCW, and that some of the dirty coal waste winds up being used as fill in pits left over from peat and gravel mining within the city limits -- in some cases ominously near wetlands -- including Fairbanks' treasured Creamer's Field Wildlife Refuge, an integral resting habitat for migratory waterfowl.

Alaska Chapter is on the scene

We intend to collect groundwater samples nearby to determine if any of these landfills are polluting the local groundwater and evaluate potential contamination. Some of this dirty coal waste material is also being used indiscriminately as residential fill on foundations and driveways with no oversight or even concern for contamination. Defining this material as solid waste lends a misguided sense of safety and security to unwitting consumers. The contractors have never had it analyzed nor are they concerned.

Fairbanks also has the 8 MW coal-fired power plant on the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) campus. This produces 1-2 dump truck loads of CCW daily. Until just a few years ago this waste material was utilized exclusively on campus as fill on many construction projects. Employees indicated it was used in road construction, under numerous buildings and parking lots, as fill for their soccer field, and even for winter traction on icy roads and sidewalks. Only when they literally ran out of room on campus did they hire a contractor to dispose of their CCW. Much of this waste winds up stockpiled at a local landscaping company until it is used as fill. The contractor says he gives it away and only charges for delivery -- which could indicate some concern for liability. Many Fairbanks residents shared personal recollections of numerous roads, driveways, and assorted businesses where this waste had been used as fill over the years.

Knowing the UAF coal fired power plant has produced 1-2 dump truck loads a day for 47 years makes one view the strikingly beautiful campus and its many sculpted hills in a new light.

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Moving UAF Beyond Coal

When everyone pulls up Alumni Drive, the Ben J. Atkinson Building is one of the first structures to greet them. The name and the building itself seem harmless enough, but a closer look out back shows the coal train, the on-site waste pit, and dark smoke: a coal-fired power plant sits at the gateway of the University of Alaska campus in Fairbanks.

The power plant has been long overlooked and ignored, but momentum is building behind transitioning away from it—momentum spurred on by students themselves. The past semester at UAF has been a busy one for students in the Sierra Student Coalition group called UAF Beyond Coal. Its first semester on campus, the UAF Beyond Coal group built a dedicated corps of student activists and an even wider network of support. In one semester, the Beyond Coal group gathered about 300 signatures from students who want to move their campus beyond coal.

The student group educated students, staff, and faculty on the health risks of having a power plant right on campus. People are concerned about many aspects of the plant, including the community garden planted in the summer months just next to the power plant.

Education was the biggest focus, especially because

Dirty Coal Waste

-- from previous page

The good news is that the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign has reached the UAF students, and there is now a growing campus "beyond coal" movement. (See adjoining article.)

We are creating a Quality Assurance Plan (QAP) for collecting numerous legally defensible environmental samples from soil and groundwater downhill of many of these disposal sites for a comprehensive evaluation. Preliminary results of our first CCW solids analysis from material used as residential fill collected this spring indicate elevated levels of arsenic, barium, cadmium, and selenium. Unless the EPA officially designates CCW as a hazardous waste and provides Federal oversight, these irresponsible practices in Alaska and around the nation may continue indefinitely. Allowing dirty coal waste to all be treated as being inert can only lead to more unnecessary pollution and risks to human health.

Background: Alaska's single operating coal mine produced nearly 2 million metric tons of coal in 2009. Approximately 1 million was utilized for energy production and residential heat in Alaska, and the other 1 million was exported to Chile, Japan and Korea. Alaska's low grade (low BTU/energy value), high moisture content, sub-bituminous coal is very low in sulfur which fills a niche market overseas. The countries using this coal blend it with higher sulfur, higher quality (high BTU/energy value) coal to lower the overall sulfur oxide (SO_x) emissions to comply with their respective regulations. ♦

-- Russ Maddox



photo: Lindsey Hajduk

Beyond Coal members Heather Warren and Amy K. Snider reach out to students during this year's Earth Day Fair, held just a stone's throw from the UAF campus coal-fired power plant.

many students had no idea that there was even an on-site coal plant. Beyond Coal students gathered petitions from classmates to urge university staff to commit to a new energy future. In addition to its continuous presence in the student center, Beyond Coal held two "days of action", on Ozone and Coal Ash, and a huge campus "Coal Unplugged" event in April.

Fortunately, the Chancellor's office seems to be moving forward. UAF's Chancellor Rogers is pushing for a more sustainable institution, especially in the wake of UAF's Sustainability Report Card set at C- for the second year in a row. (This is the national comparative evaluation of campuses created by the Sustainable Endowments Institute.) Under Rogers' leadership, there is also a student task force and a faculty-led sustainability board to increase sustainable practices on campus.

Students had initiated and passed a "green fee" where all students pay \$20 per semester to go toward campus-wide projects to promote sustainability. The Chancellor's office is fiscally matching the "green fee", which will then total nearly half a million dollars a year. The UAF Beyond Coal group seeks to get the Chancellor's office to confront the least sustainable part of the campus: its energy source. While campus initiatives so far have reduced food waste and promoted recycling, the campus's energy source has been set aside until now.

The Sierra Student Coalition, student arm of the National Sierra Club, has been active on the UAF campus this last semester and will continue to organize students to move the campus beyond coal. Over the semester, a full-time organizer worked to establish and support the group. The Sierra Student Coalition and our Alaska National staff will continue their active roles in training student leaders.

UAF's power plant, already 47 years old, was built for a 50 year lifetime. The Chancellor's office has now put other power options on the table,--ideas that are still being considered and reworked to make sure they are economically viable as well as reducing UAF's carbon footprint. UAF's Beyond Coal group will be there throughout the summer and into the next school year to push for getting the most sustainable power option off the ground. ♦

-- Lindsey Hajduk

Glacier Bay National Park integrity threatened

Please Comment on Final EIS

The Superintendent of Glacier Bay National Park is proposing, in a disappointing development, that Congress open Glacier Bay National Park to “harvest” of glaucous-winged gull eggs by members of the Huna Tlingit tribe of Alaska Natives, many of whom live in the village of Hoonah across Icy Strait from the park.

On May 28, Superintendent Cherry Payne issued a Final Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS) on her proposal, beginning a 30-day public comment period. NPS Alaska Regional Director Sue Masica will review Supt. Payne’s recommendation, the public comments on the Draft and Final LEIS’s, and then send her “Record of Decision” to Interior Department officials in Washington, D.C. for further evaluation.

A legislative EIS is necessary because the park is closed to the consumption of wildlife, including subsistence activities. Opening the park to subsistence gull egg collecting would require Congress to amend the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, in which Congress re-affirmed the park’s status as a wildlife sanctuary.



photo: Sierra Club Wayburn archives

Glacier Bay inspires Peggy and Ed Wayburn on a 1998 visit

America’s visionary national park concept is antithetical to the idea of “harvesting” wildlife in national parks. Thus it was an unprecedented departure from congressional and NPS policy governing national parks when in 2000 Congress authorized a NPS study to assess whether the eggs of “sea gulls living within the park...can be collected on a limited basis without impairing the biological sustainability of the sea gull population in the park.” The Alaska congressional delegation easily ushered the study bill through a Congress their party firmly controlled.

In 2001, in a separate effort, park managers guided a party of Hoonah Natives to the Inian Islands, a Huna Tlingit traditional gull egg gathering site just outside the park boundary in Icy Strait. The following year NPS chartered

a vessel for the villagers to again collect eggs at the same glaucous-winged gull colony. But during the two-year period, and thereafter, the NPS did not guide or fund trips to any of the five other traditional egg collecting sites in the Icy Strait/Cross Sound area near the park. One of these sites is the same distance from Hoonah as the primary site in Glacier Bay Wilderness targeted for egg collecting in the Superintendent’s proposal; two others are even closer.

In its “scoping comments” for the Draft LEIS, the Alaska Chapter urged park managers to include in their analysis an alternative they themselves had earlier identified as a result of the 2001-2 trips to non-park sites: NPS facilitation of Huna Tlingit egg collecting at traditional collecting sites *outside* the park. The Chapter’s Draft LEIS comments cited NPS and Fish & Wildlife Service research data and other relevant information on these traditional collecting sites -- information not to be found in the Final LEIS..

The Draft LEIS, while admitting that the non-park alternative was “reasonable and feasible,” eliminated it from the analysis because, the authors claimed, it was outside the scope of the 2000 law. Their interpretation conflicts with the National Environmental Policy Act’s fundamental requirement that federal agencies must consider all reasonable alternatives in environmental assessments and environmental impact statements. This legal question remains unresolved.

⇒ Please comment by June 26

You can help protect Glacier Bay National Park by urging NPS Regional Director Sue Masica to adopt the **No Action alternative** in her Record of Decision. The **No Action alternative** would preserve the integrity of one of this nation’s premier wilderness parks. It would not mean the loss of a culturally important practice, as the park managers claim. The Huna Tlingits of Hoonah, and tribal members living elsewhere, would be free to utilize the gull egg collecting sites in their traditional territory outside the park.

To send your comment by June 26, go to:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov>, search: Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve.

Mail written comments to: Sue Mascia, Regional Director, National Park Service, 240 W. 5th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501, **and to** Cherry Payne, Superintendent, Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve, Box 140, Gustavus, AK 99826.

You can mention one or more of the uniquely outstanding attributes of Glacier Bay National Park:

- enjoys World Heritage Site status as a globally significant natural area and wildlife sanctuary;
- is an International Biological Reserve in combination with the adjacent Wrangell-St. Elias and Canada’s Kluane national parks;
- provides critically important summer feeding grounds for endangered humpback whales and habitat for threatened Steller sea lions, the latter safe from hunters and poachers while in the park;

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Pondering the Future of the Tongass National Forest

Obama initiatives give cause for optimism

In mid-May the Forest Service along with City and Borough of Juneau hosted a two day conference that brought together scientists, business leaders and conservationists to look at the future of the Tongass Forest through a "Climate Change" lens. I spent two days in Juneau at this "Climate Camp" hearing from climatologists, foresters, and salmon experts who gave us the lowdown on what impacts our changing climate will have on the flora and fauna. After the science briefings we identified key components of the ecosystem and brainstormed ways that we might prove good stewards as natural systems adapt to a warmer future.

I also enjoyed "muddy afternoon runs up Mt. Roberts in "typical" Southeast Alaska weather.

The good news on climate change for Southeast Alaska is that, compared to more southern forests or more northern tundra, the Tongass will not see dramatic landscape changes. But we still must keep climate changes in mind as we craft conservation strategies -- oceans will rise, glaciers will melt and less snow will fall -- all of which will have impacts on the diversity of tree species, the likelihood of fire (particularly in the southern Tongass) and the freshwater availability and quality for salmon. The Climate Camp didn't come up with all the answers, but it was a great start to an important conversation.

Administration acts to protect Tongass

While the Juneau Climate Camp had a visionary long term view for the Tongass, two recent developments have a real potential for positive impacts in the near term. In late May Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced that the Forest Service does not plan to offer any more timber sales in roadless areas of the Tongass but will, instead, move toward sustainable jobs on the Tongass in restoration, tourism, and young growth logging. Sierra Club commended

Glacier Bay LEIS Comments -- from previous page

- has five saltwater wilderness areas that are unique in the Alaska system;
- is remarkably intact and pristine. As an early component of the national park system, the park is not encumbered by extensive private or State lands.

Unfortunately, public comments on the Draft LEIS are not printed in full in this Final LEIS along with the NPS's specific response to each point raised—the result of a change in the NPS's NEPA procedures. Instead, the NPS only summarizes the comments, which allows the agency to shape the debate to its advantage.

(The Alaska Chapter's detailed comments on the Draft LEIS are available by email from Sierra Borealis editor Vicky Hoover at vicky.hoover@sierraclub.org until June 18.) ♦

-- Jack Hession

the administration for recognizing that sustainable jobs in southeast Alaska are created not by clear cutting remaining old growth, but by moving forward with habitat restoration, road repairs, investing in trails and other recreation and tourism facilities, and smart energy projects for Southeast.

The Vilsack move toward sustainability was followed closely by news that the Obama Administration is ending legal efforts in support of a planned timber sale, called "Orion North", that would have bulldozed about six miles of new road into a roadless part of the Tongass National Forest near Ketchikan, Alaska.

The Orion North timber sale was blocked by an earlier court order won by Earthjustice holding that the logging plan violated the law. Alaska Chapter Juneau activist Mark Rorick helped Earthjustice point out the deficiencies in the logging plan. The administration had appealed that court order but



reversed itself in the new action. The Sierra Club praised the decision, which stops the money-losing Orion North timber sale, and hailed the move as a reflection of the Obama administration's commitment to end logging in roadless areas of the Tongass.

Now Sierra Club is asking the administration to back up its commitment to protecting the irreplaceable Tongass roadless areas by formally putting the Clinton-initiated "roadless rule" back in place on the Tongass.

The roadless rule was adopted by the Forest Service in 2001 to prohibit most logging and most road construction in the remaining pristine, roadless parts of the national forests. In 2003, the Bush administration issued a "temporary" exemption for the Tongass that still remains in effect, despite President Obama's campaign promise to uphold the roadless rule in all national forests.

Southeast Alaska's ancient forests are national treasures set aside more than 100 years ago by President Teddy Roosevelt. History will look kindly on a choice today to protect rather than clear cut them. ♦

-- Dan Ritzman

Oil Spills Change More Than You May Think

As I write at end of May, another British Petroleum attempt to cap the oil gusher off Louisiana has failed, and the Gulf spill is now acknowledged to be larger than Alaska's 1989 spill from the Exxon Valdez oil tanker. Many of us in Alaska are reliving vivid memories of that time, with its frantic chaos of activity combined with a feeling of utter helplessness. I cannot begin to imagine the horror faced by Gulf Coast residents as they watch crude oil continue to erupt, with no end in site. Perhaps most shocking of all, political pundits are telling us it will now be *more* difficult for Congress to pass alternative energy legislation. This is not only crazy, it is -- from our experience in Alaska -- not true.

On Spring Equinox of 1989, after ten years of environmental work elsewhere in the nation, I drove my pick-up off the ferry in Haines, planning for a peaceful rest in Alaska. Four days later, the Exxon Valdez hit the rocks. For me, as for many other Alaskans, it was a life-changing event. I washed oil off birds and sea otters. I coordinated volunteer efforts. I met my life's companion, Larry Smith, who was helping build a log boom to protect Homer's Kachemak Bay. Later, I spent years on a successful effort to use the Exxon fines paid to the state and federal governments to buy 600,000 acres of coastal wildlife habitat for state and federal parks, forests and refuges.

What I don't hear, in current spill reporting, is that

oil spills can change people, and not just those who make their living on the water. Here in Alaska, the people who were the most shocked in 1989 were politicians who had always done the bidding of the oil industry (most of our elected officials). Americans may assume politicians are liars, but in my experience politicians believe their own rhetoric. Here in Alaska, they had believed the oil industry could respond to any spill. When they learned otherwise, they supported reforms they would never have supported before.

We now hear that the Gulf oil spill has disrupted the delicate political balance that could have allowed a federal energy reform bill, with environmentally-minded Democrats getting alternative energy, while legislators from petroleum producing states would get desired off-shore drilling.

From the 1989 oil spill, I learned never to assume that people are against you, or that they can't change their minds. I am reminded of this now in a biography I am reading of Gandhi, who never gave up on anybody -- and eventually had some quite surprising converts to his point of view.

This summer, as Congress Members go home to their districts, it is essential for people around the country to communicate with them all -- not just the Members traditionally viewed as persuadable. My guess is that some who chanted "Drill Baby, Drill" are feeling shaken in their views. ♦

- Pamela Brodie, Alaska Chapter chair

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