



Sierra Borealis *alaska report*

SIERRA CLUB ALASKA CHAPTER
DECEMBER 2023



Chapter election
candidates,
p 3

Action Now: Please comment on BLM's proposal by Dec. 19. (talking points p. 2)

The Ambler Road--disaster for caribou and all Alaska's wild Arctic

Taken from an article by Benjamin Alva Polley that first appeared in Sierra magazine, Oct. 19, 2023

The Ambler Road, 50 miles above the Arctic Circle, is the last thing Native hunters and wildlife need (and the global movement to conserve "Half Earth" for Nature.) At present, Alaska's Brooks Range is one of the most remote places on the planet. It spans vast protected wildernesses like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Gates of the Arctic National Park and is largely roadless. Its few remote outpost towns and Native villages are accessible only by air or water.

That wild status could soon change. The Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority wants to build a road to enable huge open-pit copper and zinc mines on the southern flanks of the Brooks Range. A permit for the Ambler Road, as it is known, was issued by the Trump administration but suspended by President Biden, pending further environmental study. A draft of the study was released October 13; it finds that the road would be even more harmful to Northern Alaska's environment—and to Alaska Native subsistence

cultures—than previously thought. (You can comment on the study **now**.)

As proposed, the road would cross 11 major rivers, including three designated Wild & Scenic (the Alatna, John, and Kobuk) Rivers, and 3,000 streams. It would carve 26 miles

through the Gates of the Arctic National Park.

The road would require over 40 gravel mines, including

a quarry every 10 miles, to provide enough material for construction, plus numerous maintenance stations, worker camps, communication towers, and airport runways. The boreal forest would get single-span steel bridges supporting an estimated 168 ore trucks rumbling around the clock. It would be built on permafrost, requiring constant maintenance. According to the State of Alaska, this industrial road wouldn't be open to the public or even nearby villages, where many homes don't even have running water.

It would facilitate, however, Ambler Metals LLC's plans to extract \$7.5 billion of copper from the Arctic Deposit under Ambler Mountain, near the village of Kobuk. Ambler Metals says the copper is needed for modern technologies to address climate change, like wind turbines and batteries.

Copper mining has the highest risk of acid mine drainage of any metal. Such drainage requires millions of dollars to control and contain in perpetuity, and it has severely impacted many fisheries when the controls fail. In many cases, once revenue and profits dry up, the responsible

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photo: from AK Public Media

In the vicinity of the proposed Ambler Road

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parties also vanish, leaving locals and future generations to bear the cost of cleanup.

For its part, Ambler Metals argues that copper is a critical element for meeting the nation's climate-action goals and maintains that it is able to extract the ore safely. "To reach US decarbonization targets and implement existing climate laws, there's an urgent need for a domestic supply of the critical minerals that the Ambler mining district can provide. Ambler Metals' project is an essential part of the national supply chain for raw materials to manufacture clean power technologies without relying upon China," a company spokesperson emailed *Sierra*. ..

Sixty-six tribal communities whose subsistence activities could be severely impacted by the road have a standing resolution against the road. "The opposition to the road from within the region centers on food security and environmental health," says Brittany Sweeney, a founding member of [Protect the Kobuk](#), a group of northwest residents opposing Ambler Road. "There are few places left in the country where Indigenous people can continue to nourish themselves from the land..., once that goes, it's nigh impossible to get back."

The road would fragment the habitat of the Western Arctic caribou herd, one of the largest herds in Alaska, and which many Alaska Natives rely on for subsistence. The herd's numbers are already decreasing, from 490,000 caribou in 2003 to 164,000 in 2022.

"The Ambler Road has a high potential to affect the movements of this herd. We've already lost two-thirds of [it]," says Jim Dau, a retired caribou biologist with Alaska Fish and Game. "I suspect climate change is driving this decline rather than roads. Still, it's a terrible time to pour gas on an already blazing fire by fragmenting habitat and affecting movements." (The road would bisect the herd's migration route.)

"The state keeps saying that with responsible development, we can have jobs, energy, metals independence, and all this stuff without impacting wildlife or subsistence," says Dau. "It's a great sound bite but a pie in the sky."

Stanley Hawley, a resident of the village of Kivalina, says, "...having the State of Alaska in charge of the environmental regulation for the project...would be putting the fox in charge of the chicken coop."

The October 13 environmental impact statement released by the Bureau of Land Management is for the entire stretch of road, not just the part on federal land. It recognizes that the development could be disastrous to Alaska Natives' subsistence ways of life and cause the permafrost to melt much faster than previously thought. **Public comments on the EIS are being accepted until Dec. 19, 2023.**

"There are few places left in the world that we haven't polluted, built roads through, and mined, which have displaced traditional lifeways," says Sweeney of Protect the Kobuk. "Will we ever learn from the past? When is enough ever enough?" (Also see [sierra borealis](#), March '22, June '20, & Dec '19.)

Commenting on the Ambler EIS by Dec. 20

The Northern Alaska Environmental Center (<https://northern.org/>) sends this commenting template with talking points. To share your comment, sign up for testimony at an in-person hearing, or send your written comment via the BLM e-planning portal at: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/57323/570>.

SAMPLE COMMENT: (*personalize with your own words.*)

My name is [NAME], and I live in [WHERE YOU LIVE].

I am expressing my concerns about the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of the proposed Ambler Road, in response to the draft EIS. I urge the BLM to choose the **No Action Alternative** and revoke the permits for the road.

I'm against this proposed project because: [GLOBAL HARM plus *SPECIFIC IMPACTS TO YOU, YOUR FAMILY, and YOUR COMMUNITY, which COULD INCLUDE:*



Dale De Armond ©

Traditional and subsistence practices impacted by the road or mines, cutting communities off

from traditional hunting areas, eliminating berry patches, and polluting waters that are habitat to caribou and to species of fish that communities depend on, such as sheefish; and irreversible impacts to historical and sacred sites.)

Social and economic impacts to communities (violence, increased drugs and alcohol, trespass on Native land, the prohibitive cost of food if subsistence sources are lost,)

Environmental impacts (toxic air and water pollution from mines, water quality impacts from some 2900 road stream crossings, pollution from exposure of naturally occurring asbestos, impacts to fish and wildlife such as disruption of bird nesting sites and breeding success fragment an ecosystem already adversely impacted by climate change, and expose sensitive permafrost to increased thaw. This thaw would cause irreversible damage to the natural topography and alter vegetation patterns and flow of water.

Tribal and cultural resources (including **Impacts to future generations** (reduced access to subsistence resources, climate impacts)) You can think of MORE!

For these reasons—and more, I am against development of the proposed Ambler Road and request the BLM choose the **No Action Alternative** to protect the Brooks Range ecosystem and its threatened communities from the irreversible impacts of road and mine development. ❖

Alaska Chapter Election is here:

Please see candidate information below!

It's election time for the Executive Committee of the Sierra Club's Alaska Chapter again, as three of our seven ExCom seat terms are up at the end of December. We're lucky to have two very qualified and passionate candidates running to join our ExCom for the next two years. The bios and photos of the candidates are here on this page. Please read their statements carefully as you prepare to vote, and contact Chapter Director Andrea Feniger at andrea.feniger@sierraclub.org with any questions relating to our candidates, or to the voting process; or if you wish to request a paper ballot mailed to you in lieu of voting electronically.

ExCom members whose terms are expiring are chair Heather Jesse and Deanna Nielson. ExCom members whose terms continue are Adrienne Canino, Susan Hansen, Kim Kirby and Greg Stewart. Adrienne is running to be Chapter chair in 2024..

The Chapter election will be hosted on our website at sierraclub.org/alaska starting January 24, 2024 and going through the beginning of February.

Enjoy very happy holidays and look for more news early next year on combatting continuing threats to our precious environment!

----- Heather Jesse, Alaska Chapter chair (outgoing)

Candidates for election to Alaska Chapter Executive Committee



Dick Anderson

I am a retired career National Park Service employee with over 40 years experience. I worked primarily on Freedom of Information Act requests, environmental compliance (NEPA) documents, agency Wilderness policy, ANILCA of 1980 policy, and other general conservation work. I worked at the NPS Alaska Regional Office for 13 years, Death Valley National Park (CA/NV) for 10 years, Chiricahua National Monument (AZ) for 5 years, and several other NPS units. I have a BS degree in Biology from San Diego State University. I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Paraguay as a National Parks Specialist.



Santa Claus

Santa believes that our environment must be pro-actively protected to ensure that children, especially, continue to be able to view and explore the wonders of nature, have clean water to drink, clear air to breathe, unadulterated food to consume, environmentally sound structures to inhabit, and renewable energy sources to utilize. For the past decade, Santa has been enjoying spectacular Alaska. He is a former Senior Park Ranger for the Fairbanks North Star Borough and Mayor Pro Tem of the City of North Pole. His doctoral studies at New York University were in educational communication and technology.

Alaska -- more federal wilderness than any other state of course--and State wild lands too!

As we approach 2024, the sixtieth anniversary of the Wilderness Act--America's first official measure to preserve natural lands BY LAW -- it is good to remind ourselves that--in addition to the vast system of federal wilderness -- now with 805 areas in 44 states and Puerto Rico, nearly half of which is in Alaska--there are also STATE-designated wild places.

Seven states have passed laws to establish strong systems for keeping state lands wild or have durable administrative provisions to keep the lands wild: Alaska, California, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New York, and Wisconsin. In addition, five other states have set aside one or two areas to remain wild--Hawaii, Maine, Minnesota, Ohio, and Oklahoma. (Information from *IJW (International Journal of Wilderness)* APRIL 2008 • VOLUME 14, NUMBER 1)

The state of Alaska has designated some zones in state parklands as Wilderness and an entire parcel of state land as a state wilderness park--Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park. In Alaska, wilderness areas were administratively designated in 1972, and Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park was legislatively designated in 1972. There has only been limited administrative wilderness designation since 1972. The state wilderness park definition, located in Alaska State Statute 41.21.990, contains no size criteria but emphasizes the protection of wilderness values. Wilderness areas were defined by the 1982 Alaska State Park System and Statewide Framework report to be of a size that maintains the area's wilderness character and emphasizes values similar to the U.S. Wilderness Act. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation is responsible for management. Management plans have been written for each of the state parks containing wilderness areas and the state wilderness park to give management directions and list special provisions.

At nearly 1.6 million acres, Wood-Tikchik State Park is the largest state park in the nation. This one park encompasses



Wilderness in Wood-Tikchik State Park

nearly half of the State Park land in Alaska and 15 percent of all state park land in the United

States. The park's land is quite diverse and includes 12 lakes over 1,000 acres, rivers up to 60 miles in length, mountains

exceeding 5,000 feet in elevation, and extensive lowlands.

There are two wilderness zones, and the management philosophy is one of non-development and protection of the area's wilderness character. Park facilities are rustic and few, with great emphasis placed upon low-impact camping and Leave No Trace © practices.

Kachemak Bay Wilderness State Park

Much less remote than Wood-Tikchik and easier to reach for most Alaskans, this wild state park on the southwest corner of the Kenai Peninsula and opposite the city of Homer, receives more visitors. Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park became Alaska's first state park in 1972. It abuts the southern boundary of Kachemak Bay State Park in the Kenai Mountains and extends south, into the waters of the Gulf of Alaska. The park offers excellent backcountry skiing, hiking, hunting, fishing, and sightseeing opportunities. It contains 198,399 acres including 79 miles of rugged coastline. There are no developed facilities in the park, however, a back-country hiking trail is being developed from Tutka Bay to Taylor Bay.. <https://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/aspunits/kenai/kachemakbayswp.htm>

Chugach State Park, right on the outskirts of Anchorage, also features extensive areas kept wild.. ❖

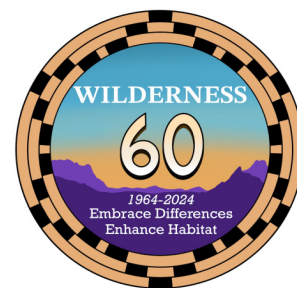
Let's celebrate 2024 as America's year for wilderness

Update

Murkowski bill to grant Tongass lands to Southeast communities

In November the Senate Energy Committee postponed votes on several public land bills, including Senator Murkowski's bill to create five new urban corporations for Native residents of five Southeast Alaska towns -- S.1889 (Murkowski, Sullivan), the Unrecognized Southeast Alaska Native Communities Recognition and Compensation Act. This bill would create five urban Native corporations for Alaska Native residents of Haines, Petersburg, Wrangell, Ketchikan, and Tenakee. Each corporation would receive 23,040 acres of Tongass National Forest surface estate, 115,200 acres (180 square miles) in total, with the Sealaska Native regional corporation owning the subsurface estate of the 115,200 acres. An estimated 90 percent of the proposed selections are old growth stands, according to an analysis by Center for Biological Diversity, and the bill conveys to the five corporations Forest Service roads and related facilities needed for commercial logging operations. (see *sierra borealis*, June 2016, Sept 2022) Rep. Mary Peltola has introduced the bill into the House as HR 4748.

As this issue of *sierra borealis* goes online, Chairman Joe Manchin has not set a date for committee votes on the public land bills. Senate adjournment is slated for December 15. ❖



The Alaska Railroad-a climate benefit that needs more use-

In August of this year, the Rail Policy Subcommittee of the Sierra Club Transportation Chairs Team released its Rail Transportation Statement.

The Statement emphasizes that rail is much more energy efficient than road transport, especially for freight. The low friction of smooth steel wheels rolling on smooth steel rails allows rail to emit only a third of the greenhouse gas of highway transportation. Rail is also safer and reduces traffic congestion and wear and tear on highway infrastructure by reducing the numbers of cars and trucks on the highway.

Yet rail in the U.S. is underutilized – for both freight and for passengers. In the interest of the planet, rail subsidies need to be increased and highway subsidies reduced.

In Alaska, rail is also underutilized. While Alaska has its own railroad, opened by the federal government just over a century ago (July 1923) our now State-owned Alaska Railroad Corporation could haul a lot more freight and many more passengers on its 470 miles of mainline track. The influence of the Federal Highway Trust Fund is one reason it does not. The Trust Fund subsidizes Alaska highways by millions of dollars per year, making driving artificially cheap. Lack of a similar subsidy makes it is hard for the Railroad to compete. Cars and trucks pay only part of their way through gas taxes; their subsidies are hidden in the cost of highways they use.

On the other hand, our state-owned Alaska Railroad Corporation is a self-sustaining corporation operating without state subsidy. Its freight, passenger and real estate services generate revenue to cover personnel, employee benefits, operations and maintenance expenses. It receives some federal funding to augment its capital program, but this is a small fraction of the federal funding Alaska's highways receive annually.

Another reason our Alaska Railroad Corporation does not haul more freight and passengers is that rail is inadequately included in Alaska transportation planning. In January 2023, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF) released "Alaska 2050", the State's Long Range Transportation Plan and Freight Plans. Rail is generally not well integrated into the Plans—which mainly feature highways, airports, and marine/riverine transportation. ADOT & PF's reasoning for this is stated in the introduction to the draft Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP): "This LRTP is a 'multi-modal analysis with a particular emphasis on the facilities and infrastructure owned and managed by ADOT&PF'".

It is true, the Alaska Railroad Corporation is not owned and managed by ADOT&PF. Its employees are not part of the state personnel system. Yet the ARRC is owned by the State of Alaska. The Commissioner of ADOT&PF sits on the ARRC's Board of Directors. The annual Surface

Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) which includes federal grant money for the Railroad as well as for Alaska's highways, also falls under the purview of ADOT & PF.

The public needs and deserves to better understand this complex relationship. Although the Railroad is not owned or managed by ADOT&PF, its State-owned status means it belongs to all Alaskans. It is crucial that future transportation planning give it a major role, because it can 1) help lower GHG emissions; 2) reduce traffic congestion 3) reduce the need for electric power generation to electrify road vehicles 4) provide a safer alternative, particularly during snowy and icy conditions (the Glenn Highway is notorious for winter accidents.) Trains perform better than huge trucks and buses in snow and ice.

"Alaska 2050" is written basically as a highway plan, sometimes ignoring that the Railroad runs right alongside. For example, it states: *"The 35 miles of the Glenn Highway between the Mat-Su Valley and Anchorage sees 33,000 vehicles daily with 2,000 trucks. There is no alternate route."*

What about the Railroad, which parallels the Glenn Highway between the Mat-Su Valley and Anchorage for the entire 35 miles, hauling passengers and freight daily? What better "alternate route" could there be, than this trackway built in 1923, decades before the Glenn Highway?

The Alaska 2050 freight plan has a section on the National Highway Freight Network, of which Alaska is a part. The plan states (p.50) that up to 30 percent of the National Highway Freight Program funds can be used toward intermodal or freight rail projects. Yet on the following page, it laments truck delays due to highway bottlenecks, completely ignoring the fact that in each case, the rail track is right there! Planning should be undertaken with the Alaska Railroad Corporation immediately, to determine how much of this freight could be moved from truck to rail, to eliminate potential road widening needs there.

Finally, much of the freight rail section of the Sierra Club's Rail Transportation statement is devoted to the conflicts posed by Amtrak having to share tracks owned by freight rail companies. But the state-owned Alaska Railroad (www.alaskarailroad.com), successfully operates both freight and passenger rail on the same track. This is an advantage, in that Alaska freight and passenger trains are set up to cooperate rather than fight with each other. It is also an advantage as interested Alaskans reinvigorate commuter rail planning (*sierra borealis* Sept 2022). State planners with our Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities need to pay more attention to the tremendous asset we have in the Alaska Railroad, and make better use of it to help our environment. ❖



photo: Glacier Discovery

Gwich'in leader warns of continued threats to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

-- by Raeann Garnett

(Extracted from an article appearing in *Sierra* magazine Nov. 26, 2023 which was adapted from an oral statement made by Chief Garnett during an October public hearing organized by the Bureau of Land Management to consider drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.)

My name is Raeann Garnett. I am 27 years old, and I am the First Tribal Chief of Native Village of Venetie Tribal Government. I am very proud, blessed, and grateful to be Chief of our Tribe. It's a huge honor. Venetie and Arctic Village are my home. I love our people, and I love our land. We may not be rich with money, but we are rich in culture.

Our culture is the land: caribou, moose, birds, and fish. We have recently finished our hunting season—the primary time when we can get the resources we need to exist throughout the year, both culturally and practically. However, the future of the Arctic Refuge and our existence



photo: from AK Public Media

is at risk. Currently, the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service are meeting with Tribes regarding, among other topics, the oil and gas leasing project in the Arctic Refuge.

Our people have relied on the land of the refuge for millennia. For us, it is truly *the sacred place where life begins*. For generations, during the fall months we gather together and wait to harvest caribou for the upcoming winter. Our village is located along the migration route of the caribou for this purpose.

If oil and gas drilling projects move forward on the refuge, there is no telling how much our community and our culture will suffer. Hunters must wait hours and sometimes days to bring back meat that is needed to feed our families through our harsh winters. But we are happy to do so because it is what we have known for generations. It is part of what makes us Neets'ąjį Gwich'in. Caribou are our main source of food. A disruption to their migration route will make an already difficult situation even worse.

Today, all our freezers are full, and we are very blessed. If the land is disturbed by oil and gas projects, and the caribou change their migration patterns away from our

village, our lives will be catastrophically affected.

If we are forced to fly foods in by freight, we will need hundreds of dollars to

fly in and purchase steak,

chicken, and pork—a cost that is usually unnecessary when we have a successful harvest. We cannot afford that.

My grandma, a strong Neets'ąjį woman, passed away two years ago. She is the one who gives me my strength today to keep on going. I have only two more years in my term as Tribal Chief, but I will never stop speaking on this issue before my people and beside them. I will never stop saying no to oil drilling. I am against it and always will be. ... Our culture, the land, and animals are sacred to all of us. The health of the Arctic Refuge depends on it. ❖



photo: Kyle Joly, National Park Service

Caribou herd in snow

Western Arctic notes:

Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club's Director of Conservation Campaigns for the Conservation & Outdoors program, went north and west in Alaska last summer, and posted this news on his return: "Just returned from a float down the Ilnavik River in the western Arctic. Definitely a new favorite. A beautiful river with great bluffs, hiking, and wildlife. We will soon see the increased protections for the western Arctic special places."

Not long after Dan's trip, the Interior Department did establish new tougher regulations on oil development for the Western Arctic -- to "raise the bar for development" in response to rapid warming in the region and accelerating degradation of the permafrost." At the same time, new protections for the Western Arctic's "Special Places" were established. Environmental advocates applaud the approach. ❖



photo: Dan Ritzman

Along the Ilnavik River

Action needed to tackle Air Quality problems in Fairbanks

Fairbanks North Star Borough has been in violation of the Clean Air Act (CAA) since at least 2008. A generation of children born and raised in the Fairbanks North Star Borough (FNSB) have never known sustained clean air. The bad health effects of breathing dirty air including premature mortality are on display throughout our community. Analysis of preventable deaths from PM 2.5, the most common air pollutant, lays out the risks.

My own son, who was born with congenital heart defects, was further sickened from a sudden onset of polluted air. As a result, Alex required surgery with a pacemaker implant that wouldn't have been necessary at that time if the exposure hadn't happened. The cost was more than \$500,000. Often, when we knew that air quality was bad and we couldn't stay indoors even with multiple air filtering devices, we left town. He died in June 2022. It is impossible to pin his death on bad air; however, we know for sure that breathing polluted, toxic air has an adverse affect on everyone's health and he was no exception.

Many cannot leave town or afford filtration and so for all this time their pleadings and ultimately their despair have been filed away. Most have given up hope. Enforcement of existing rules has been almost non-existent. Serial polluters have been given a slap on the wrist, only to continue polluting.

The debilitating effects of breathing polluted air are well known and have been treated as a political situation instead of a health and safety issue

by local and state leaders. Political reasons have been proffered again and again as a reason for not being able to clean up our air. Fifteen years have passed, the air is somewhat cleaner but still twice as high in pollutants as the CAA requires. More than \$40 million dollars of federal money has been spent to change out wood stoves with no appetite to stop burning.

Citizens for Clean Air (CCA), a grass roots group formed to clean up the air and keep people warm, was founded in 2008 and over the years has filed five timeline lawsuits with the help of Earthjustice (EJ), Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT), and the Alaska Sierra Club against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for not

enforcing the CAA in the highly polluted FNSB. CCA appreciates the EPA's efforts and has worked closely with them to advance the cause of cleaner air. Each time CCA has prevailed in winning consent decrees that set more timely deadlines to meet air quality benchmarks, we experienced harsh push back from those who did not feel clean air was worth a more robust investment.

Efforts to encourage local doctors to publicly recognize that clean air is better for health than dirty air had no effect. CCA funded nationally recognized doctors specializing in the bad health effects of polluted air to come to Fairbanks and North Pole to speak and train. Thankfully, one local pulmonologist and some nurses rallied to the cause. Others cited pressure from their employers and the political dangers of speaking out.

At this time the FNSB is still in "Serious Air Quality Non-Attainment". That is the worst designation, and we have been told that no other place in the nation has ever been so bad for so long. The latest iteration of the State Implementation Plan (SIP) has been partially disapproved, and federal highway funds for some local projects have been put in "constraint". The EPA backed down and did not require large point sources to upgrade to burning ultra low sulphur diesel (ULSD), even though a group of international scientists came to Fairbanks in the winter of 2019 and extensively tested our air quality. They discovered a dangerous new, toxic chemical, hydroxymethanesulfonate (HMS) in higher proportions in Fairbanks than in Beijing, China. HMS is a combination of SO₂ (point sources) and formaldehyde (wood burning and car exhaust).

CCA provided Alaska legislators with a list of ten ideas that could be implemented to help the state clean up the air and avoid "sanctions". One of those ideas was having the state pay for the difference between #2 heating fuel and ultra low sulphur diesel until more renewable energy sources were in place. State leaders argued that this cost difference would be a tremendous burden on citizens and point sources. While the state hardly bats an eye at billions in subsidies for foreign corporations, they did not implement a subsidy for Alaskans trying to stay warm and pollute less.

Now, local constraint is in place, the very real threat of further sanctions looms, and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, responsible for modeling a SIP that will meet the CAA standards, is working to produce a model of attainment by July 2024. Sixteen years and *still* not enough progress toward healthy air. Modeling is one thing, cleaning up the air is another.

Interior Alaskans need cleaner air, and we are counting on the EPA to uphold the law. ❖

-- by Patrice Lee

Patrice Lee is the director of Citizens for Clean Air and a Fairbanks resident.



Exploring the Tongass- Enjoying Sitka's extensive trail system

For an outdoor enthusiast, few places have more opportunities than Sitka, Alaska. Located on Baranof Island, in the heart of the world's largest temperate rain forest, the Tongass National Forest, Sitka has a plethora of easily accessible trails at varying levels of difficulty. Sitka's climate also lends itself to year-round activity and exploration. Closer to Seattle than to Anchorage, Sitka boasts a much warmer climate than much of the state, rarely reaching temperatures cold enough to sustain snow. As long as you're outfitted in waterproof gear and ready for the possibility of a light drizzle, you're ready to explore all that Sitka has to offer.

Mosquito Cove

Located on the Starrigavan Bay side of the island, Mosquito Cove is an easy loop offering many photo ops and vistas. At only 1.5 miles, the hike has little elevation gain, only 281 ft, and big payoffs. Winding through the lush forested hillside and out on the beach, it provides an exceptional and dynamic hiking experience. Recent windstorms have felled quite a few trees on parts of the trail, so expect to climb over or under at least a few trees. For an opportunity to see swans, ducks, and other water fowl, I suggest walking the Starrigavan Estuary Life Trail's ADA compliant boardwalk. Located right near the Mosquito Cove trailhead, the boardwalk has several spots, both covered and uncovered, to sit and watch the wildlife. This provides for comfortable viewing in any weather. The boardwalk can get very slick when wet, so walk carefully or be prepared by wearing shoes with lots of traction.

Beaver Lake

On the opposite side of Baranof island, at the Herring Cove trailhead, is a 3.4 mile long loop to Beaver Lake. Fairly steep on the in, the trail gains 520 ft in elevation, taking you up into rugged mountains and back down to enjoy a serene walk complete with log steps and stepping stones. Old growth trees line the lake, truly capturing the Tongass at its most exquisite.

I was lucky to hike the trail on a foggy morning, which gave me an amazingly atmospheric experience. The lake also boasts docks, fishing platforms, and picnic



photo: Heather Jesse

Nature beckons! Get Outside

Once in a lifetime sight: Anchorage's White Raven

Anchorage has been lucky enough this year to receive a visitor far rarer than a blue moon, a white raven. Due to this extraordinary occurrence, white raven spotting has become quite the topic of conversation among locals. Seemingly residing in midtown, the white raven has been commonly sighted at spots like Arctic and Northern Lights, Spenard and Northern Lights, and 36th and Arctic. The raven has even garnered international attention through an active Facebook group. The group has activity daily and began as a forum for locals

to share photos and real-time sighting reports of the raven. It has since become a place to share art of all types in appreciation of the white raven and boasts members all over the world who enjoy following the daily happenings of the raven.

Most likely born on the Kenai peninsula last summer, the



photo: from Alaska Public Media

bird is known as a leucistic raven. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge shared reports of a raven born with white feathers in June, and Anchorage's white raven is believed to be the same bird. A leucistic raven lacks feather pigmentation of melanin and other pigments, a different condition from albinism. Most markedly, a leucistic raven doesn't have the red eyes that are a trait of albinism. Our white raven features prominent blue eyes and is a beautiful, photogenic bird with admirers around the globe. If you see the white raven- be sure to snap a photo and know you are siezing a once in a lifetime opportunity. ❖

-- Heather Jesse

pads to take advantage of on sunny days. There's also an option to extend your hike over to Blue Lake, larger than Beaver Lake. The hike travels next to a stream featuring several picturesque waterfalls among the dense greenery. Be sure to keep an eye out when returning to Herring Cove trailhead as you might even spy a whale ahead of you in the cove.

Sitka Cross Trail

The Sitka Cross Trail is a wonderful hike running parallel to the mountains and Sitka's neighborhoods and covering almost eight miles, the entire length of the town on Indian River past Sandy Beach. With plenty of access points to the street, the trail is a great way of getting around town while also treating yourself to the vast amount of nature and forest available right in Sitka's back yard. Some sections of the Cross Trail are more strenuous than others, but like most trails around Sitka, this one is extremely well maintained. Mostly gravel and well groomed, the trail has steps when needed, plenty of benches, and is generally barrier-free. ❖

-- Heather Jesse



Come to Akela Space in downtown Anchorage. Enjoy food and community as we celebrate the conservation wins of 2023 and look on to 2024!

Sierra Club national outing enjoys Prince William Sound



Every year, the Sierra Club national outings program includes some 15 to 20 trips to Alaska—varying from car camping with lodge stays to strenuous backpacking. There are ocean kayaking trips and river rafting trips. Alaska trips for 2024 already appear on the Sierra Club website:

https://content.sierraclub.org/outings/featured/incredible-new-journeys-are-here#trip?suppress=true&utm_source=outings&utm_medium=email&utm_content=october2023&utm_campaign=newsletter.

As an example from 2023 trips, here are excerpts from leader Jay Anderson's report of his September weeklong cruise outing aboard M/V Discovery in Prince William Sound:

We had a great trip despite persistent rainy weather and were able to get off the boat every day - usually twice. We kayaked twice - once through the ice at the face of glaciers. We ate and drank like royalty - Megan is a great chef and spots bears while she cooks.

We saw lots of sea otters, harbor seals, and black bears and got up close to enormous Steller's sea lions.




COMMUTER RAIL COMMUNITY EVENT

Anchorage Museum Atrium

12.21.23
6-8PM

Come enjoy free access to the
museum's Railroad Exhibit and
learn about the potential for
commuter rail in Alaska!



Commuter Rail Community Event: December 21st 6-8 pm. Enjoy free Museum entrance and hear about the work our commuter rail coalition is doing to bring more rail options to Alaska! (Also see railroad article, p. 5)

There were a few pink salmon still around that kept the bears near the mouths of the streams where we could observe them. Birding was pretty good although fall is not prime season.

Captain Dean Rand is a wealth of knowledge of the ecosystem, the human history, the human impacts, and the politics. He is a keen observer and showed us evidence of earthquakes, waves, glaciers, and humans shaping the environment. We saw 200 pound rocks that were recently thrown high up on shore by wave action from glaciers calving.

With the good relationship we've developed with Discovery Voyages, we'll have more trips here in the future.

-- Jay Anderson



Sierra Borealis / alaska report

is the newsletter of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

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Plastic pollution is strangling our oceans

An estimated 11 million tons of plastics enter the ocean every year from land-based sources. In the absence of drastic intervention, scientists predict a nearly three-fold increase in ocean plastic by 2040. Cutting production of single-use plastics would vastly reduce these amounts as well as help mitigate the climate crisis, as 99 percent of plastics are made from fossil fuels. Ocean Conservancy states that a 50 percent reduction in single-use plastics by 2050—their goal—would be the equivalent in greenhouse gas emissions to taking every car on Earth off the road for almost two years.

photo from Pixabay



Shorelines suffer with the oceans



Congressional legislation

Reintroduced in October 2023 by Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Representative Jared Huffman (D-CA2), the **Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act of 2023** (HR 6053 and S 3127) is the "gold standard" of federal legislation to make meaningful reductions in the amount of plastic pollution the U.S.—especially that coming from single-use plastics.

With 11 Senate cosponsors and 47 in the House, the bill would benefit from more Congressional cosponsors. No Alaska members have cosponsored.

The bill states as its aim: To amend the Solid Waste Disposal Act to reduce the production and use of certain single-use plastic products and packaging, to improve the responsibility of producers in the design, collection, reuse, recycling, and disposal of consumer products and packaging, to prevent pollution from consumer products and packaging from entering into animal and human food chains and waterways, and for other purposes.

-- from Ocean Conservancy <https://oceanconservancy.org/> and from Congress.gov.) ❖