



# Sierra Borealis *alaska report*

SIERRA CLUB ALASKA CHAPTER  
DECEMBER 2020



## Army Corps denies proposed Pebble Mine permit

***The threat's not yet over--but maybe only a stone's throw away***

Chapter election, candidates, p. 4-5

The Army Corps of Engineers is finally acknowledging the very real risks which the proposed Pebble gold and copper mega-mine poses to the cherished Bristol Bay.

In a sweeping about-face, in late November, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has said "No!" to the widely condemned gold and copper mine proposed at the headwaters of Bristol Bay.

### Happy 40th Birthday, ANILCA

December 2, 2020 was the 40th anniversary of the signing by then-president Jimmy Carter of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, (ANILCA) the largest land preservation package ever passed by the U.S. Congress. It brought Alaska 10 new national parks, monuments, and preserves, plus expansions of existing Glacier Bay, Katmai, and Mt. McKinley (now Denali); eleven new national wildlife refuges and statutory protection for five pre-ANILCA executive-order refuges; several Tongass National Forest Wilderness areas including Admiralty and Misty Fjords Wilderness National Monuments. Altogether, ANILCA brought 103 million acres in parks, wildlife refuges, wild and scenic rivers, and wilderness areas. Since then, these protected areas have routinely been attacked, and we keep on fighting to preserve them.

tives for millennia, and the Bristol Bay watershed's salmon runs are a lifeline for the Yup'ik, Dena'ina, and Alutiiq Tribes. Col. Damon Delarosa, the Corps' Alaska district com-

mander, stated that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has "determined that the applicant's plan for the discharge of fill material does not comply with Clean Water Act guidelines and concluded that the proposed project is contrary to the public interest." Delarosa said the agency's denial caps a nearly three-year review process of the potential project involving multiple agencies, and was based on all "available facts and complies with existing laws and regulations."

The mine developers plan to appeal the decision back to federal regulators, but with the opposition of President-elect Joe Biden and many others, the project's days may be limited. Pebble opponents, including Alaska senior Senator Lisa Murkowski, are already discussing an idea to take the mineral deposit off the table from development forever. Senator Murkowski said, "This is the right decision, reached the right way."

And her colleague, Senator Dan Sullivan, stated, "Given the special nature of the Bristol Bay watershed and the fisheries and subsistence resources downstream, Pebble had to meet a high bar so that we do not trade one resource for another. As I have been saying since August, Pebble

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## Pebble Mine -- from page 1

does not meet that bar."

"The fact that this permit denial comes from a pro-development administration speaks volumes to the need for strong, permanent protections for the Bristol Bay watershed and all it sustains," United Tribes of Bristol Bay, a group representing 15 Bristol Bay Tribal governments, said in a statement.

Longtime critics of Pebble called the decision a win for tourism, sportfishing, commercial fishing, and Alaska Native villages that need the salmon for food. The mine is proposed for construction on state land about 200 miles southwest of Anchorage, near headwaters of the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. (See *sierra borealis* June & Sept 2020, March 2019, March 2018, Sept 2017, ...Nov 2009, and earlier.) The Alaska newsletter has covered this issue for about 15 years--since then-Sierra Club Alaska staffers Jack Hession and Vicky Hoover visited the site of the proposal in 2005.

Prior to the Army Corps' latest denial, the Corps had already stated in late August that a Pebble mine with a 20-year life would cause "significant degradation" in the Bristol Bay watershed. Their finding that the project could not be permitted "as proposed under the Clean Water Act" left open an escape clause for Northern Dynasty Minerals to submit a mitigation plan that offset damage the mine would cause to Bristol Bay region wetlands. This would entail a steep hurdle, and the Corps' Record of Decision has now rejected the proposed mitigation plan; it was determined to be out of compliance with requirements, lacking adequate information in multiple areas, including financial assurances and details needed to determine if it would offset the mine's impacts.

In September, a conservation group had released the so-called "Pebble Tapes," after secretly employing people to act as potential investors in the mine. Then-Pebble chief executive Tom Collier and Northern Dynasty Minerals head Mark Thiessen were caught on tape discussing what they described as close ties with Alaska legislators, Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy, and the Corps. The governor has denied these allegations.

Information from these tapes led two Alaska legislative leaders to call on Governor Dunleavy to stop helping the proposed Pebble mine upstream from Bristol Bay. House Speaker Bryce Edgmon, I-Dillingham, and Rep. Louise Stutes, R-Kodiak, wrote the governor in early October. Specifically, the two lawmakers said the administration should not provide state land for the mitigation plan that mine developers were then preparing in hopes of gaining a federal permit. That permit has now been denied.

According to the Washington Post, Dec 2, 2020, "An unlikely coalition of opponents formed when President Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., Fox News host Tucker Carlson, and Vice President Pence's former chief of staff, Nick Ayers—who all have enjoyed fishing or hunting around Bristol Bay—joined with traditional environmental



photo: Anchorage Daily News, adm.com

Lake Iliamna, Alaska's largest lake, not far east of the proposed Pebble mine site, would suffer from mine pollution and toxic wastes

groups and the region's tribes in opposition to the project. The incoming Biden administration does not support the Pebble Mine proposal. President-elect Biden has said that as president, he will "protect Bristol Bay and all it offers to Alaska, our country, and the world."

(Information compiled by editor from The Anchorage Daily News, Alaska Public Media "Daily Digest" news@alaskapublic.org, Washington Post, and National Resources Defense Council news update.) ❖



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December 6, 2020, marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment by then-President Dwight Eisenhower of the Arctic National Wildlife Range, predecessor of the 1980-established Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, America's largest national wildlife refuge. Long before this land was federally protected, Gwich'in and other Indigenous Peoples have been stewards of this land that for millennia was sacred for their subsistence and culture. The Arctic Refuge is home to a vast wildlife ecosystem, including the Porcupine caribou herd, denning polar bears, musk oxen, wolves, and nearly 200 species of migratory birds. The cultural sanctity of these lands is profound.

(from Arctic Refuge Defense Campaign, <https://www.arcticrefugedefense.org/>)

# Election 2020 results in Alaska

## Update on the Alaska State Election Results

The Alaska State election results were certified on the afternoon of Monday November 30. Below are some of the unofficial national results from the Alaska Division of Elections. Just over 60 percent of Alaska's 596,000 registered voters cast ballots.

### U.S. President /Vice President:

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Joe Biden/Kamala Harris	Dem	153,502	43%
Donald Trump/ Michael Pence	Rep	189,543	53%

### U.S. Senator:

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Al Gross	Dem	145,813	41%
Dan Sullivan	Rep	190,772	54%

### U.S. Representative:

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Alyse Galvin	Dem	159,710	45%
Don Young	Rep	191,606	54%

I was surprised that Dr. Al Gross, candidate for Senator, earned only 41 percent of the vote. In my opinion, Gross ran an honest campaign and emphasized that he did not support the Pebble Mine plan-- to build a huge copper and gold pit mine by the Canadian Mining company (Northern Dynasty) in the Bristol Bay Region. This huge pit mine has the potential to pollute the Bristol Bay watershed's sockeye salmon spawning streams. (see article, pp 1-2.) Dr. Al Gross is an orthopedic surgeon as well as a commercial fisherman.

His opponent, Senator Dan Sullivan, had not opposed the Pebble Mine plan before the election even though the majority of Alaskans oppose the plan. Dan Sullivan also accepted donations from Northern Dynasty Mining Company.

Dan Sullivan endorsed campaign ads claiming that Al Gross was really from southern California. The truth is that Al Gross was born and raised in Southeast Alaska and now resides in Petersburg. Al Gross' father was former Governor Jay Hammond's Attorney General. Both Al Gross and his wife are physicians, and they both attended the University of Southern California and obtained master's degrees in Public Health. Gross views climate change as an existential threat and supports renewable energy.

## Alaska State legislature

The Alaska State House has 40 representatives. The 2020 election results indicate that a Majority caucus—a coalition of Democrats, Independents and Republicans—could control the State House in 2021. However, that depends on decisions of two lawmakers--Rep Louise Stutes, a Republican reelected from Kodiak's House District 32 and Josiah Patkotak, an

Independent representing House District 40 (Northwest Alaska and the North Slope). Louise Stutes is currently a member of the Democratic-led Majority caucus. Patkotak is a moderate Republican who could join either side. He indicated that he will join with fellow "bush" legislators Democrat Neal Foster of Nome and Independent Bryce Edgmon from Dillingham. The latter two lawmakers are part of the current House majority caucus.

It also depends on whether Republican fiscal moderates Steve Thompson and Bart LeBon (both of Fairbanks) decide to join with fiscally conservative Republicans. Currently Steve Thompson and Bart LeBon are part of the Democrats majority caucus.

A Majority caucus in the State House must have 21 to 22 members to pass legislation. That is because it takes 21 "yes" votes to pass a bill including a budget. It will be interesting to see how the Alaska State House organizes in 2021.

The State Senate also has division in its ranks. There are 13 Republicans and just 7 Democrats in the 20-member Senate. But there are deep divisions between the Republicans who want full Permanent Fund dividends (PFDs) and support Gov. Dunleavy's drastic budget cuts and those who want to protect the PFD but also support the funding of basic services like K-12 education, the University system, the State ferry system, and more.

Fiscally moderate Republicans in the Senate include Bert Stedman of Sitka, Gary Stevens of Kodiak, Click Bishop of Fairbanks, and Natasha von Imhof of Anchorage. For them to join with the more Conservative Republicans they would need to support a large PFD check. In the past, they have opposed a large PFD.

It is possible that coalitions of Democrats and moderate Republicans could emerge in both the State House and Senate!

Unfortunately, some very fine conservation-minded candidates lost their elections in 2020. Carl Johnson, an award-winning wildlife photographer and Democrat from Anchorage, lost to Republican Roger Holland in Senate District P (9,648 to 10,501). Another conservation-minded candidate, Christopher Quist, lost to Republican Bart LeBon from downtown Fairbanks (3,025 to 3,767).

Perhaps we can persuade these conservation-minded candidates to run again!

-- Susan Hansen

(Susan Todd assisted in preparation of this article)

## Chapter election for 2021 officers--first-ever all-digital election

Once again December brings with it a flurry of snow, a chill in the air, eggnog to the grocery stores, and of course, the Sierra Club Alaska Chapter election! Our Chapter has been lucky to have been led by a passionate, well informed, and diverse leadership during the rollercoaster year that has been 2020. This year, the terms of three of our Executive Committee (ExCom) members are up, and these long-serving ExCom members will move into new roles with the chapter and open up their ExCom seats for new leaders to step in. Thank you to Hope Meyn, our current Vice Chair; Toshihide Hamazaki, our Webmaster; and Yasuhiro Ozuru, who has filled many roles in his time with the Chapter, always willing to step into whatever role is needed most.

All of our outgoing members have been with the Alaska Chapter and served on the ExCom for quite a long time, and we are extremely grateful for the energy and dedication they have brought to their service and volunteer efforts. Thank you to these ExCom members for guiding our chapter's leadership and for your steadfast commitment to conservation activism in Alaska.

The candidates running for ExCom seats in this election are Gregory Stewart for Legal Chair, Adrienne Canino for Treasurer, and Susan Hansen for Conservation Chair. Please see their pictures and bios below -- continued next page, p. 5, bottom.



**Adrienne  
Canino**

**A**drienne is an excited new member of the Alaska Chapter. She currently works as a Data Librarian at Axiom Data Science, recently coming from a position with the same title at a university library. Before libraries, she worked in environmental conservation, specifically a youth conservation corps that included environmental educating, street tree coordinating, and green infrastructure promoting. Adrienne has recently moved to Anchorage from the Finger Lakes area of New York, with her husband and adorable coonhound. She says, "I'm interested in this position because I want to contribute my energy, spreadsheets are good friends to me, and I believe serving would be a great way to get to know my new community. I also can't wait to get my hands dirty, whenever it is that we do outdoor service work again." ❖



**Susan  
Hansen**

**S**usan, a Sierra Club life member, is a biologist who worked as a ranger-naturalist in Katmai National Park, Alaska in the 1970s. Later she did a marine mammal subsistence survey in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta for University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She was a National Park Service research anthropologist interviewing Yup'ik Eskimo elders talking about their subsistence and oral cultural traditions. For four years she has been Alaska Chapter Conservation Chair and delegate to the Council of Club Leaders. She has organized Chapter workshops to attract more Alaskans to support conservation of Alaska's iconic wildlife--especially of predators. She also organized workshops with Ariel Hayes, Sierra Club political director, to discuss with Sierra Club members how we should get involved in supporting conservation-minded Alaska State legislators. Her



**Gregory  
Stewart**

**G**regory is running for Legal Chair of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club. He is a paralegal currently working for the State of Alaska in their watchdog agency, the Alaska Public Offices Commission, focusing on ensuring proper compliance with the financial disclosures of elected and appointed officials. As the incumbent Alaska Chapter Legal Chair, Gregory works to make sure that the Chapter is aware of any ongoing litigation in which the Sierra Club is engaged. Gregory hopes to eventually get his JD degree and further engage in the state's many inevitable and ongoing legal fights related to conservation and climate change. ❖

list of conservation-minded candidates for the Alaska State House and Alaska State went to all Club members in Alaska. Susan also volunteers for Alaskans for Wildlife in Fairbanks. ❖

# Administration pulls Tongass Forest out of roadless rule protections

We Alaskans know that our state is home to some of the greatest expanses of incredible nature this planet has to offer, but this especially rings true for Tongass National Forest. Often referred to as “North America’s Amazon”, it is by far the largest national forest in the U.S. and spans an extraordinary 16.7-million-acres that covers the majority of Southeast Alaska. It harbors the traditional homelands of multiple Alaska Native Tribes, and seemingly endless types of flora and fauna whose ecological health is vital to the survival of our planet. Unfortunately, like many of Alaska’s other special wild places, it is at grave risk of being exploited.

The Trump Administration is moving forward with their plan to exempt Tongass National Forest from the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule put in place under President Clinton. This rule has protected numerous roadless sections of national forest lands around the country from having roads built into or through them, thus protecting them from mining, logging, invasive plant incursions, and other development generally accessed by roads. Now, the administration has granted a full exemption for the Tongass from the Roadless Rule, opening more than nine million acres of the vast rainforest--lands previously protected from road-building and old-growth logging.

The administration’s process has been deeply flawed. The environmental impact was not considered in good faith, and important voices on this issue were ignored. Multiple Alaska Native Tribes say that the administration did not live up to the promise of Tribal consultation when considering the fate of their traditional homelands. This is, of course, nothing new in our country, but it is

disappointing that our government ignores the voices of Natives who have such a deep relationship with the land.

Tongass National Forest is home to incredible biological diversity that helps it to sustain a healthy ecosystem. Its abundant wildlife includes all five salmon species, grizzly bears, and the world’s largest concentration of bald eagles. Some places of the Tongass have already been heavily logged, but the wildlife has had solace in the protected areas--including the 19 wilderness areas designated in various parts of the Tongass. At nearly 5,756,000 acres, these 19 areas account for approximately one third of the forest. Road building is prohibited in Wilderness areas, but the remaining two thirds of the Tongass is now at risk from the Trump administration actions.



The preservation of this forest for the people and wildlife that rely on it is reason enough to stop this process, but the development of Tongass also has larger implications on the fate of our planet. Tongass roadless lands include extensive areas of old-growth trees, making it one of the world’s major carbon sinks. These old-growth trees absorb and store carbon from the atmosphere. Logging the trees would not only take away that important function but also release into the atmosphere all of the carbon currently being stored in them. This would significantly exacerbate the rapid climate change we are already facing.

Based on the actions of The Trump Administration, on the urging of Alaska’s Congressional delegation, the Tongass is technically open and available for road building and logging. We hope that companies will pause to realize this is bad business and that our government will reconsider their misguided effort. For the time being our best path forward will be increasing awareness and exposure of the Tongass issue in hopes that public pressure will deter logging companies from beginning projects in the area for fear of facing backlash if they do log old-growth trees.

Sierra Club is already urging the incoming Biden Administration to make reinstating the roadless rule a priority after January 20. These forests are some of the best and last tools we have in the fight to save our planet from a climate catastrophe. They are relied upon by Native Alaskans who have practiced subsistence culture for thousands of years, and they enhance our planet’s essential biodiversity.

Protecting the Tongass has been and will continue to be a priority for Sierra Club Alaska. For the land, for the animals and for the people, we will do our part to keep this forest thriving. ❖ -- by Andrea Feniger

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## Chapter election -- continued from page 4

For the first time, this year’s elections will be digital-only, with elections being held on our website from January 7-8. This is a departure from elections past, where we’ve had mail-in elections, and from our most recent election, which accepted a mixture of mail-in and electronic ballots. We are hopeful that this new feature will increase accessibility and involvement, and we are always looking for feedback from our members. Let us know how you feel about this electronic election and your preference for future elections, at [alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org](mailto:alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org) or by sending a letter to our PO Box. Voting is one of the most powerful and easy ways to engage with your local chapter, and it is your right as a Sierra Club member to have your voice be heard. We would love to hear about issues that matter to you, so that we can all work together to explore, enjoy, and protect this amazing state. Happy holidays to you and your

loved ones. ❖ -- Heather Jesse, Alaska Chapter chair

# Outgoing administration hastens to lease fragile Arctic Coastal Plain

The Trump Administration, being on its last legs and approaching its final days, is trying its hardest to take one last stab at allowing seismic exploration and land leasing in the coastal plain of the remote Arctic National Wildlife Refuge--which butts up against the US-Canadian border.

This sensitive land, long sacred to the Gwich'in people, is in danger of having large trucks, built to pound the ground, unleashed by a company that is actively undergoing a bankruptcy, SAExploration. This company plans to disrupt the dens and lives of polar bears that are known to be active in the region and has essentially deemed that disruption as "negligible." The Sierra Club and partner organizations, working in support of the Gwich'in people's steadfast opposition, are actively fighting this. The leasing plans created in 2017 are still being litigated in court, and there is no good economic reason for the seismic exploration to happen at this time. This is a last-ditch effort by the exploration company, the Trump Administration, and those who stand to eventually profit from this oil exploration and extraction project.



Caribou on the Arctic Refuge coastal plain

photo: Alaska Public Media, 9/11/2020

We argue that the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) decision to prepare an environmental assessment instead of an environmental impact statement has violated the National Environmental Policy Act, and that the environmental assessment failed to take the requisite "hard look" at the impacts of the seismic surveys. We also argue that the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to issue an incidental harassment authorization, despite the extensive record of evidence that the seismic surveys would cause far more than negligible harm, was arbitrary and capricious.

The Trump Administration continues to solidify the sales of the leases all the while. On November 17, 2020, BLM published a notice in the Federal Register, calling for nominations from potential lessees. The 30-day public comment period for this ends on December 17, 2020. Thirty days prior to holding a lease sale, BLM must publish a notice identifying the specific parcels that will be offered. If BLM

does not attempt to publish the sale notice until after the 30-day comment period on the call for nominations has ended, the earliest BLM could hold the lease sale would be January 19, 2020. The review process usually takes more than one day, but it is unclear to what extent the Trump Administration may attempt to circumvent normal review processes. (see update below for their new circumvention.)

We are hopeful that the Trump Administration simply won't have the time to accomplish these seismic surveys or the land leases. However, our legal team is ready to tackle the issue in court when the opportunity presents itself.

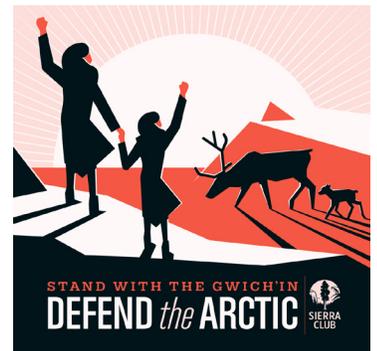
**Update:** The opportunity may be with us sooner than anticipated: On December 3, the BLM announced its Notice of Sale for the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Federal Register Notice is scheduled to publish on December 7, setting up the actual lease sale to be conducted on January 6, 2021, via video livestream.

"Congress directed us to hold lease sales in the [Arctic] Coastal Plain, and we have taken a significant step in announcing the first sale in advance of the December 2021 deadline..." stated BLM Alaska State Director Chad Padgett.

Our legal teams are springing into action. Drilling opponents, in addition to all previous arguments, can now also target the aggressive timeline in court. BLM failed to wait for the official conclusion of the preceding step in the process (the "call for nominations") before scheduling a sale date. ❖

-- by Gregory Stewart, Legal Chair for the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

**LATEST:** Bank of America has announced it won't fund Arctic development; so now ALL major U.S. banks and most Canadian banks stand for saving the Arctic Refuge.



## A note from Sierra Club Executive Director Mike Brune

"The Trump administration is rushing to sell leases to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, even though 70 percent of Americans are opposed. Donald Trump is determined to do as much damage on his way out the door as he possibly can. He's spent his entire time in office offering up our public lands to private industry and sacrificing our health so polluters can have fatter profit margins. And we've spent the entirety of his time in office resisting and blocking his attempts to do so. If he won't stop now, neither can we."

# Alaska conservation opportunities for President Biden

President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to reverse various Trump Administration's ill-conceived executive orders and regulations--125 at last count and possibly many more. Here's a round-up of Mr. Biden's opportunities to defeat Trump's attacks on the public lands in Alaska.

## -- *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.*

On January 6, two weeks before Biden takes the oath of office, BLM will auction off oil and gas leases on the coastal plain of the Refuge. (Leasing was authorized in 2017 when Sen. Lisa Murkowski, fearing to offer her leasing bill as a stand-alone measure, tacked it onto the big tax reduction bill.) President Biden can cancel the leases. (See article this issue, p. 5, and many more in *sierra borealis* earlier.)

## -- *Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness.*

The latest attempt by the State to push a road across the wilderness area is its claim in federal court that the village of King Cove is effectively surrounded by the refuge and thus is denied access to the community of Cold Bay and its airport. (See *sierra borealis* June 2020, March 2018 and earlier.) ANILCA guarantees access to inholders and to non-inholders effectively surrounded by conservation system units. The State's case, strongly backed by the Trump Administration, is a "hail Mary" because King Cove is not effectively surrounded; it has proven air and marine access to Cold Bay. President Biden can oppose the State in court, and promote alternatives to the proposed road. (See *sierra borealis* June 2020, March 2018, etc.)

## -- *National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.*

Before leaving office the Trump Administration intends to finalize its drastic revision of the Obama Administration's plan that had oil and gas leasing coupled with protection for exceptionally important wildlife habitats as required by Congress. Trump's plan makes approximately 80 percent of the reserve available for exploration and potential leasing, and greatly reduces protection for the reserve's Special Areas. President Biden can restore the Obama plan by directing a total revision of the Trump plan. He can also propose statutory protection for the reserve--such as the national wildlife refuge proposed by the Alaska Coalition during the Carter Administration.

## -- *National Preserves.*

During the Obama Administration the National Park Service adopted a regulation closing the preserves to brown and black bear baiting, hunting of wolves and their pups during spring rearing season, and other Alaska Board of Game "intensive management" rules aimed at reducing numbers

of "predators" in hopes of increasing animals for sport hunters. The Trump Administration revoked the Obama regulation. President Biden can do the same to the Trump rule. (see *sierra borealis* June 2020, June and Sept 2018, Sept 2017, etc.)

## -- *Supreme Court's hovercraft decision.*

Writing for the Court, Justice Elena Kagan concluded that Plaintiff John Sturgeon can legally use his hovercraft on the Nation River within Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. Preserve rangers had told him hovercrafts are prohibited in national park system units. Kagan found that because the State owns the bed and banks of the river, the State, not the NPS, controls uses on the river. By extension, the decision opens navigable rivers, including wild rivers, in other conservation system units to hovercrafts and other motorized means of access incompatible with the values and purposes of the units. Concurring with her colleagues but unhappy with the decision, Justice Sonia Sotomayer, in a separate statement with the late Ruth B. Ginsberg, wrote that in establishing the conservation system units Congress surely didn't intend to turn over control of the rivers within them to the State, and that it's up to Congress to restore the necessary federal authority. President Biden can make such restoration a high priority. (see *sierra borealis* June 2019, Dec 2018, Dec.2017, March 2016, Dec 2015, June 2012.)

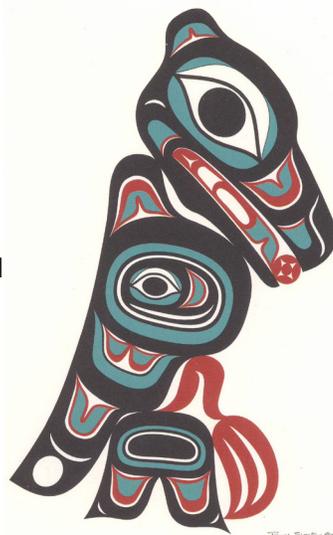
## -- *Ambler Road.*

BLM has approved a road right-of-way from the Pipeline Haul Road to the Ambler mining district near the southwestern boundary of Gates of the Arctic National Park. The road would cross the contiguous Gates of the Arctic National Preserve, including the centerpiece Kobuk Wild River. (See *sierra borealis* June 2020, Dec 2019.) In ANILCA Congress directs the Interior Secretary to provide access across the preserve for "surface transportation purposes." Yet in its final EIS for the road the BLM identified a route that doesn't cross the preserve, and the NPS in a required related report identified a less damaging--but still destructive--crossing. President Biden can direct the BLM to circumvent the preserve. He can also propose that Congress convert the preserve to a national park wilderness addition to the adjoining park.

## -- *Roadless rule and Tongass.*

In late October the Trump Administration Forest Service exempted the Tongass National Forest from the Clinton Administration's roadless rule that prohibits road construction, road reconstruction, and commercial logging on 9.2 million acres of inventoried roadless areas in the Tongass. (see article this issue, p 4) This leaves the inventoried roadless areas subject to the Service's 2016 Tongass Land Management Plan. President Biden is expected to review the exemption and the 2015 compromise by a stakeholders advisory group. ❖

-- Jack Hession



Raven © Israel Shotridge

# The Alaska Long Trail--an exciting project

Long trails have experienced a resurgence of interest and use in recent years as thousands of citizens from across the globe have rediscovered the euphoria of the hiker's high and the raw emotional beauty found at the completion of a long or especially difficult trek. Largely accepted as any trail greater than about 30 miles, or 50 km, long trails in the National Trails System come in at 29 throughout the United States. Of these 29, only two of these long trails can be found in Alaska, the nation's most expansive and arguably most beautiful state.

The Alaska Long Trail, a proposed long trail stretching from Fairbanks to Seward, is the newest project to be taken on by the non-profit Alaska Trails and was conceived in May of this year by one of their board members. While the current plan of connecting Fairbanks to Seward would span around 500 miles, many see the potential for the project to grow to more than 2000 miles, connecting to the Brooks Range and to a future Southeast Long Trail.

The project has quickly gained attention and support,



photo: Heather Jesse

Heather Jesse helps with working on reconstructing a portion of the Iditarod Trail in 2018 that will eventually become part of the Alaska Long Trail.

with a story by AK Public Media and two op-ed pieces written for Anchorage Daily News by Tony Knowles, former Mayor of Anchorage and Governor of Alaska.

It's easy to see why the Alaska Long Trail has garnered such high profile support so quickly following its inception.

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trails across the world bring in millions of dollars in revenue each year. With no age limit, hiking is not only a favorite pastime, it is a return to our biological roots as a largely migratory bipedal species. Hiking is inclusive of all ages, with long trails attracting anyone from teens to octogenarians. While some visitors may take full advantage of the length of the trail and others may simply utilize it for a quick day hike, undoubtedly the trail will provide economic stimulus. Backpackers utilizing the trail for lengthy trips

will have to stop at the communities along the way to restock on essential items, providing economic stimulus throughout the state.

The proposed future Southeast Long Trail would include several ferry rides, if realized, bringing the potential for increased revenues to the Alaska Marine Highway System. For those hoping to experience an easily accessible slice of Alaska's legendary vistas with a simple day trip, it is estimated that if only one half of all out-of-state visitors spent an extra day in Alaska, it could provide an additional \$137 million each year. The long trail is touted as a relatively simple way to accomplish this.

## Economic stimulus brings supporters

With supporters placing so much emphasis on the economic benefits of the Alaska Long Trail, it is important to consider who bears the brunt of the financial burden of constructing such an epic trail. As this project is relatively new and largely conceptual at this point, little funding has been secured, though there are a variety of potential sources to draw from. With a plethora of federal funding opportunities to pull from, the question is not if the Alaska Long Trail will receive the funds it requires but when. This question will be a little tougher to answer as federal subsidies depend on many factors. The Great American Outdoors Act, for instance, offers \$3.5 million a year if we are able to cover administration costs and secure a match in funding. While we won't go into all of the funding resources in this article, you can find more information, including how to advocate for the funding of the Alaska Long Trail, at <https://www.alaska-trails.org/>.

Trails in the Municipality are busier than ever, with daily use up by almost 150 percent, according to Google data, indicating that there is no better time to begin this project. With no idea how long the economic repercussions of the pandemic will affect our state, and with hiking as the #1 fastest growing attraction of tourists to Alaska, completion of the project may help aid in the recovery and economic rebound. In addition to this, a COVID relief package is currently being considered by Congress that would provide funds for trail building as a mechanism of returning Alaskans to work who have been impacted by the pandemic.

As we have learned recently, it is no secret that we need to diversify and strengthen industries outside of oil and gas in order to stabilize our state's economy in the long run. The Alaska Long Trail is a simple way to move forward on one aspect of this diversification, with the potential of economic benefits for generations to come. ❖

-- by Heather Jesse

Nature beckons!  
Get Outside

## Outings Cancelled? *we get outside anyway*



photo: Hope Meyn

**From Hope Meyn:** Neighborhood skiing has become my new household pandemic therapy. When the snow comes down heavy enough the skis go on right outside the door and we ski on the sidewalk several blocks down to a trail. It's a good reminder to connect with the weather, the trees, the birds and the moose. To leave that warm protection from the elements and appreciate all the outdoors have to offer in the moment.

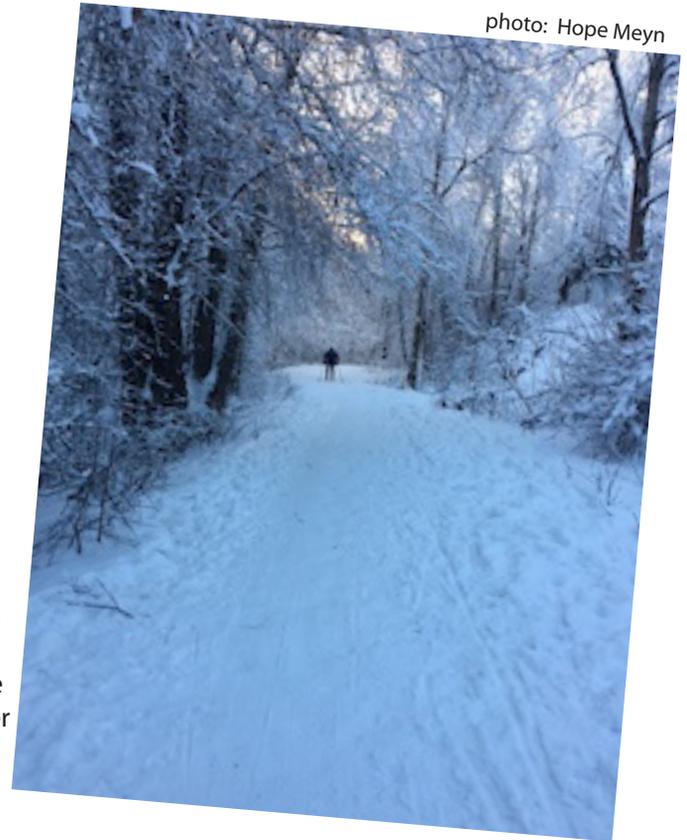


photo: Hope Meyn



photo: Hope Meyn

And here are the skis!

**From Heather Jesse**



Heather Jesse writes about her photo: This wintry picture was taken on Wednesday, December 2, at Barbara Falls, a short local hike in Eagle River.

-- Over to next page (p 10) for more about Nature outings .

# Enjoying the outdoors in Alaska as pandemic concerns continue

Andrea Feniger sent us these photos of her recent winter time outdoor enjoyment; she comments: Winter hikes may be more difficult in some ways, but they truly transport you to another world by surrounding you with ice-capped mountains and snow covered trees. I really enjoyed doing this nine-mile loop from the high Glen Alps Trailhead that included Middle Fork Trail and part of the Powerline Trail. I even got a close (maybe too close for comfort) excited to embrace the that

I look at lots of moose. I am beauty and challenges come with winter in Alaska.

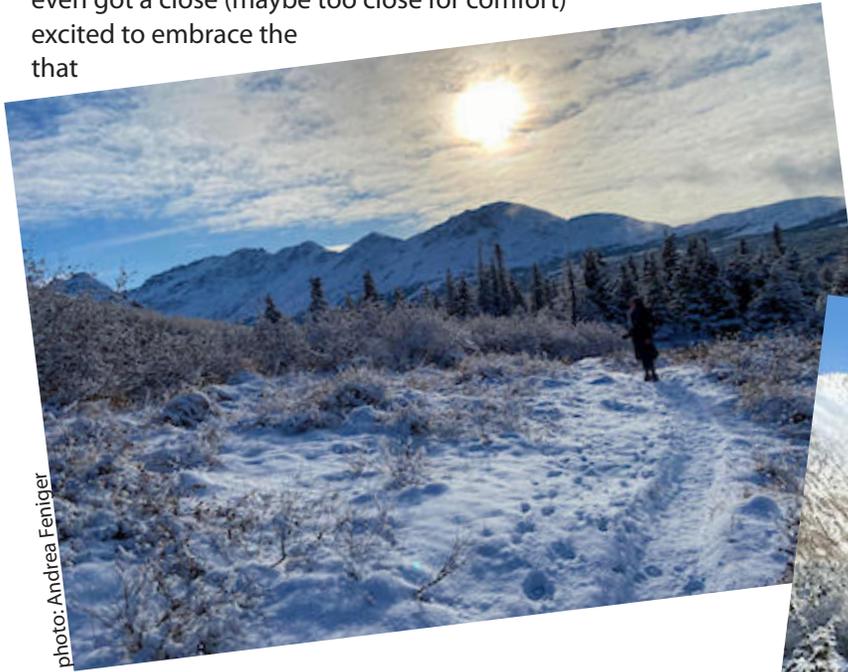


photo: Andrea Feniger

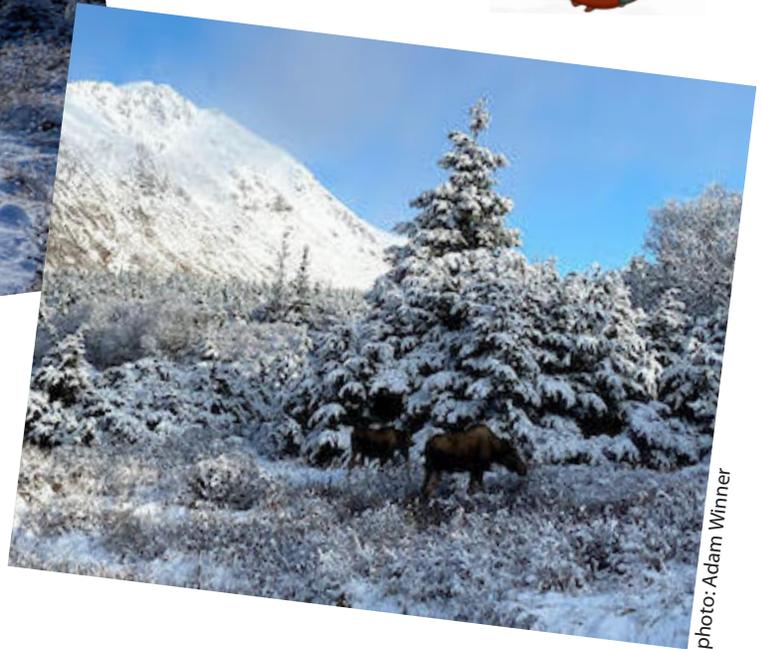


photo: Adam Winner

## Sierra Borealis / alaska report

is the newsletter of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

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### Sea urchins vs. otters on Aleutian reefs

Sea urchins are devouring the massive limestone reefs surrounding the central and western Aleutian Islands — a process exacerbated by climate-driven changes in the marine environment, according to a new study published in *Science*. In Unalaska, the largest community in the 1,200-mile Aleutian archipelago, rich kelp beds line the island's shores, and a growing sea otter population seems able to keep the sea urchins in check.

But in other parts of the central and western Aleutians — starting west of Samalga Pass and the Islands of Four Mountains — a sharp decline in the otter population from killer whale predation starting in the 1990s has led to a boom in sea urchins. (from October 2020.)



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