

# An Opportunity to End the Timber Wars: How Collaboration in Southeast Alaska has Helped to Dissipate Conflict

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**T**he Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska represents the nation's largest National Forest, and arguably, the Forest most fraught with controversy. Over the past several decades, the region has faced conflict as the timber industry, environmentalists, commercial fishermen, subsistence users, tourists and recreational users, Native communities, and others have debated the best use of the Forest's resources. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS), in response, was faced with a decision about how to address these conflicting interests, while meeting the agency's multiple use mandate to manage the land for the diverse needs of present and future generations.

Beginning in 2014, I traveled frequently to Southeast Alaska as part of a third-party facilitation team supporting a diverse stakeholder group charged with defining a path out of conflict for forest management in the region. In the next few pages, the reader will gain a sense of the history of conflict on the Tongass National Forest; an opportunity to move past conflict with incorporation of diverse viewpoints; factors contributing to successful implementation of a new approach to forest management; and challenges still facing the region.

## Logging the Tongass National Forest

In Southeast Alaska, one of the last places in the United States that is harvesting old growth timber, some individuals may have a hard time believing the phrase, 'the Timber Wars are over.' On an unusually sunny day on Prince of Wales Island in September 2016, land managers, community members, timber industry representatives, environmentalists, and national and regional leaders gathered in hopes that the statement could hold true for the future of forest management for the region. Such a gathering of diverse individuals, however, was not always possible.

The Tongass National Forest represents the largest landholding in Southeast Alaska, with 16.7 million acres of temperate rainforest and immense resources, including healthy fish stocks, a dynamic tourism industry, vast expanses of high-quality old growth timber resources (including species of Sitka spruce, and yellow and red cedar), and a diversity of native wildlife (Meridian Institute 2015). These resources, including timber, provide for the livelihood and way of life for communities and Native villages throughout the region.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Tongass, like many forests in the Pacific Northwest, experienced a timber boom, based primarily on two 50-year timber

contracts for pulp mills put in place in the 1950s (America's Salmon Forest N.d.). The contracts provided the pulp mills with rights to harvest up to 13.5 billion board feet of timber, resulting in the harvest of several hundred thousand acres of old growth forests over the following decades. In the early years of harvest, forest management practices differed significantly from today's practices, lacking the environmental protection measures that are now in place. In the 1960s through 1970s, scientific knowledge and social concern about the impacts of timber harvest increased on the Tongass and throughout the country, resulting in conflict about the best uses for National Forests, and whether large-scale old growth timber harvest should continue (Beier et al. 2009). On the Tongass, voices on one side stressed the importance of protection of the intact temperate rainforest ecosystem, and those on the other side advocated for the economic value of timber harvest in one of the last places where such a resource existed (Alaback N.d.). Not unlike the lawsuits that the USFS faced in areas of the continental US, in 1975 a federal court ruled on the side of environmentalists, with a determination against clear-cut logging on the Forest (Beier et al. 2009). This was followed shortly after with a 1976 court decision that prevented continued clear-cut logging within an existing timber contract.

In the wake of these lawsuits, Congressional interventions, such as the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), sought to provide direction, clarity, and a source of compromise regarding how these public lands were to be managed (Beier et al. 2009). At a national scale, NFMA mandated changes to the way the USFS conducted its business, including an adherence to the agency's multiple-use mandate, development of comprehensive management plans for each national forest, and inclusion of public input regarding management approaches. However, implementation of these mandates,

particularly with regards to multiple-use, were left to the interpretation of USFS staff, ultimately resulting in continued litigation and appeals for years to come. On the Tongass, these ongoing challenges led to the Forest being known "as a place of seemingly endless litigation and bitter conflict" (America's Salmon Forest N.d.).

The 1981 passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) sought to appease environmentalists and the timber industry through provisions that placed nearly one-third of the Forest under protected status and provided multi-million-dollar annual subsidies to the timber program (Beier et al. 2009). Rather than reducing conflict, however, the Act added fuel to the fire – the operable timber base was reduced significantly through the newly protected areas, while at the same time, the target annual timber volume was increased in response to the available subsidies. The continued conflict, along with changing market conditions, ultimately led to the closure of the pulp mills in the 1990s (America's Salmon Forest N.d.). However, the legal fight between environmentalists and industry continued, as the remaining timber operators sought to maintain their operations, and in turn, provide economic stability to the region's forest-dependent communities.

About two decades after the closure of the pulp mills, another national-level intervention came in July 2013 in the form of a memorandum from then-U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, mandating the transition away from old growth timber logging practices on the Tongass to those primarily focused on young growth forests (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2013). This mandate, while offering guidance on necessary changes, still did not provide the level of clarity and direction needed to define a path out of conflict.

## Diverse Viewpoints – A New Way Forward

Following on the heels of Secretary Vilsack’s memo, the Tongass National Forest began the process of developing an amendment to its Land & Resource Management Plan, focused on the transition to primarily young growth-based timber harvest. As part of this process, the Forest convened a diverse stakeholder group under the Federal Advisory Committee Act, offering an opportunity for public involvement and ownership of the process. This group, the Tongass Advisory Committee (TAC), was charged with “providing advice and recommendations for developing an ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable forest management strategy” (USFS 2014). The involvement of such a group represented a shift in management approach for the Forest. It brought together divergent views and interests, including those that had been at odds for so many years (environmentalists, local communities, and the timber industry), to answer the question of how to manage the Forest so that the vast environmental and cultural resources are sustained, while also ensuring continued socioeconomic benefits to surrounding forest-dependent communities.

In his 2006 paper, *Governing the Tongass*, Martin Nie posed the question, “Might a collaborative approach...be a way of moving forward in Southeast Alaska?” (2006:472). He hypothesized that the approach could offer an opportunity for constructive dialogue and democratic decision-making processes, potentially leading to a forest-planning alternative that represented a compromise among those at the center of the debates, environmentalists and timber industry (Nie 2006). In December 2015, after several months of deliberation and problem solving, the TAC did just that: they offered consensus recommendations for a path forward,

which were ultimately included as the preferred alternative for the Tongass Land & Resource Management Plan Amendment. Reflecting the pragmatic nature of their dialogue, the TAC submitted their recommendations as a package that included not only policy recommendations for Forest management, but also specific guidance on how to implement, fund, and monitor the recommended approach through practices within the USFS, how to coordinate with other landowners across the broader landscape of Southeast Alaska, and how to ensure value to surrounding communities.

Looking back at the process, there were several factors that led to the ability to achieve agreement in an 18-month timeframe while others had been unable to bridge differences, even in multi-year efforts. This effort began with a shared vision and dedication to problem solving. While the group represented many different perspectives with differing priorities, they agreed on one thing from the outset – the importance of supporting the region’s communities. The members reflected on the outcomes of the timber wars in the ‘Lower 48,’ and specifically in the Pacific Northwest, and wanted to learn from those processes. The group saw their charge as an opportunity to avoid a top-down mandated approach to change, and therefore avoid potential negative repercussions to the region’s residents.

TAC members included representatives from environmental non-profit organizations, timber industry owners and operators, Alaska Natives, state and local government, salmon fishing industry, research institutions, and community members at large. Regardless of the interests that they represented, they all quickly agreed that socioeconomic impacts to communities were paramount. Many local communities had benefited from the economic boom of the timber industry in the previous century, and in effect

had already, or were currently, feeling the impacts from a reduced presence. The group articulated a vision for a future, “comprised of prosperous, resilient communities that have the opportunity to predictably use and benefit from the diversity of forest resources to achieve the cultural, social, economic, and ecological health of the region for current and future generations” (Meridian Institute 2015).

With this shared vision as a central focus, the group members showed a dedication to problem solving and identifying a solution that worked for everyone. This involved a willingness to understand each other’s perspectives, and strong relationships forged through the process, at times even representing others’ viewpoints in their absence. Starting with a group barbeque, followed by a series of field visits to young growth stands and timber mills, the members got to know each other in their individual capacities, as opposed to the organizations that they represented, and developed a shared sense of place. These relationships were amplified through a significant dedication of time and effort outside of formal meeting times to conduct background research, forest modeling, and co-generation of ideas.

In addition to the relationships developed within the group, there was also a strong partnership established with the USFS, with local, regional, and national-level government leaders serving as champions for the TAC and their work products. Throughout the process, group members faced significant pushback from their constituents due to their willingness to work across the table and find common ground. Upon submitting the group’s draft recommendations at a meeting with U.S. Department of Agriculture and USFS leadership, a TAC member acknowledged the amount of risk that each member faced, and pointedly stated, “If you go out on a limb, it’s always good to know who holds the saw and who holds the net. Tell us, are

you holding the saw or the net?” Holding that net to back up TAC members, should they be targeted, was an important role of USFS leadership, as the group’s ideas were challenged by many outside groups attempting to undermine their efforts.

During the process, the TAC members worked with their respective constituent groups to try to identify solutions that would work for all interests but were not always successful. In fact, during that May 2015 meeting when the TAC submitted its draft recommendations, public comments were resoundingly negative. In the words of one TAC member, “Conservatives say no, conservationists say no, tourism says no, fisheries biologists say no, wildlife biologists say no, timber says no, public comment says no, constituents say no, owners in the Lower 48 say no. Everybody generally, across the board, says no to what we’re doing on this TAC” (Kheiry 2015). Nevertheless, the TAC held strong to their conviction that their recommendations represented collaboration among diverse interests, and therefore an opportunity to move past the divisive nature of management for the region. In their eyes, the negative response from all sides was indicative of their ability to reach compromise – no single interest group was disproportionately advantaged or disadvantaged in the outcome. For that reason, the group needed assurance from USFS leadership that the recommendations would be implemented in full, so that all interests would be met.

The agency agreed to incorporate the TAC recommendations to the best of their ability, which meant including them as the preferred alternative for the Plan Amendment. This support was further amplified by a focus on transparency – the TAC was transparent about how they reached their recommendations, through open public meetings and thorough documentation of all discussions, and, in return, USFS staff took the time to walk through their approach of translating

the recommendations into an alternative for consideration, ensuring that the recommendations were interpreted correctly. Since the TAC finalized their recommendations, agency leadership has continued to champion the efforts of the TAC, reaching out to members as needed with clarifying questions and to ensure that the original intent of the recommendations is maintained as the Amendment is implemented.

The TAC was not the first time a diverse group came together to agree on change in the Tongass, but it was the first time that such a group was empowered to implement this change through its direct line to the USFS as a Federal Advisory Committee with a specific, narrow mission directly linked to the Forest Plan Amendment. Following the recommendations, several TAC members showed their dedication to the process through the formation of the Tongass Transition Collaborative (TTC), charging themselves with the role of holding the Forest accountable to achieving the recommendations set forth by the TAC, and providing a convening role for interested stakeholders and community members to have productive dialogue with the USFS. In this role, TTC members seek to *help* the Forest with implementation, rather than simply challenging Forest actions with which they disagreed.

Central to the TAC's recommendations was a recognition that the USFS's way of doing business required a shift in culture from one that focused on rules and regulations, or 'what *can't* be done,' to one of collaboration, integration, flexibility, innovation, and adaptability, leading to an approach that sought out 'what *can* be done.' The TAC's dedication to such a collaborative approach not only enabled the achievement of ground-breaking agreement, but also embodied a new culture of transparency and inclusiveness that the TAC members believed was essential for the Forest to embrace. Breaking down those barriers was not an easy task, but

TAC members saw individuals throughout the USFS considering new ways of doing things. They were working across disciplines to identify win-win opportunities for timber and wildlife; considering input of industry representatives to ensure economic viability of proposed projects; and working with other landowners as true partners.

### **Working Together – Pursuing an All-Lands Approach to Forest Management**

In the last few years, Tongass leadership and many organizations throughout the region have embraced the benefits of collaborative approaches to planning and resource management. The TAC, and its successor, the TTC, brought together a wide range of perspectives into formalized groups dedicated to working together. In that spirit, many other examples of partnerships have emerged to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. The way that adjacent landowners in Southeast Alaska are pursuing cross-boundary approaches to land management is a prime example of such a spirit of collaboration.

As mentioned above, the large majority of Southeast Alaska is comprised of National Forest lands; however, there is a suite of other landowners that manage timber: the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Lands, Sealaska Timber Corporation, and the University of Alaska Trust Lands. Rather than acting as competitors in developing timber sales, these entities have begun working together as true partners to find ways to achieve efficiencies in forest inventory, sale planning, contracting, workforce development, and resource sharing. Constructed in 2014, Edna Bay Log Transfer Facility was the result of coordination at the federal, state, and local levels, resulting in cost-effective shared infrastructure. In addition to project partners, the local community

had many opportunities for dialogue and input, ensuring local benefits, and therefore, local buy-in for the project (Meridian Institute 2016).

In spring of 2016, the State of Alaska Division of Forestry and USFS State & Private Forestry entered into a cooperative agreement to achieve several goals of the transition to primarily young growth-based forest management, with a specific focus on efforts such as forest inventory, community workforce development, and socioeconomic benefits. While negotiating the terms and protocols of the agreement proved difficult due to differences in management structures in a state versus federal agency, the process allowed for a greater understanding of each other's cultures and approaches, resulting in the beginning of a constructive partnership between the two agencies around this issue. That partnership was manifested in September 2017. For the first time, a timber sale was completed through a Good Neighbor Authority contracting agreement, in which responsibility for timber sale planning and preparation on USFS lands was shared with the State of Alaska Division of Forestry, resulting in a young growth sale on Kosciusko Island (Bluemink 2017). Agreements such as this allow for efficiencies in timber sales, reducing the timeline for a sale to months as opposed to years, and foster a continued working relationship between the two agencies, which will be important for continued forest management throughout the region for years to come.

In addition to engaging other landowners, new opportunities for engaging the timber sector have surfaced. By offering industry the chance to engage in dialogue around sale layout and preparation, creative solutions emerge – for example, waste from a timber sale can be utilized as large woody debris for stream restoration projects, effectively incorporating restoration into part of

the business model for the industry. Collaboration has also resulted in new opportunities for building future capacity for forest management. For example, a partnership between the USFS, State Divisions of Forestry and Economic Development, Sealaska Timber, Spruceroor Community Development, and Sustainable Southeast Partnership has led to two successful seasons of the Forestry Training Academy, a workforce development program that provided on-the-ground training and career opportunities for community members in the region. The partnership ultimately serves the joint purpose of building skilled workers for the industry and offering local employment and economic benefits (Sealaska, 2017).

### **Obstacles and Challenges – A Need for Ongoing Collaboration**

Reflecting on the benefits of collaboration does not mean that challenges are no longer prevalent. When collaborative solutions are developed by an external stakeholder group, but are the responsibility of a government agency to implement, there can be a lack of consistency in the way the solutions are applied. The TAC provided a path forward, and the TTC supplies the necessary oversight and support to ensure continued improvements and progress. However, it is the responsibility and authority of the USFS to evolve internally and continue to work in a collaborative manner, ensuring the solution is implemented properly. While USFS staff were not directly represented on the TAC nor currently on the TTC, they serve an important function by providing scientific information, analysis, and background documentation as needed, and as a sounding board for understanding what is and is not possible to implement within the agency. The TTC serves a similar 'sounding board' role for the agency, offering guidance about what is possible from an external perspective. While this shift toward

collaboration is becoming the norm, there are areas where continued relationship building and joint problem solving are needed to address concerns that face the region and its residents.

The TAC recognized from the start that there is a need for a timber industry presence in Southeast Alaska – allowing for continued timber products, workforce opportunities for community members, and the need for ongoing forest management and restoration that provides benefits to wildlife, subsistence, and future timber stands alike. As the industry continues to face the decline of old growth timber supply and the need to identify new markets for the supply of young growth that will soon be available, the viability of the industry, in terms of skilled workers, machinery, capacity, and specifically, the availability of economic timber supply, is a real concern. But it does not have to be.

Collaborative approaches to project development can help ensure restoration and habitat improvement bring value to the region, and highest value conservation areas are avoided, ultimately addressing concerns that otherwise could lead to litigation. Through collaboration, industry can be included in sale planning conversations to ensure that offered sales are viable and valuable for current markets. Other landowners can continue to work across boundaries to find efficiencies through innovative contracting mechanisms and resource-sharing agreements, and develop sales collaboratively to plan across space and time to produce opportunities for industry in a more coordinated fashion. Finally, community members and other stakeholders can voice their priorities and concerns in a productive manner that ensures all of the important forest resources



**Figure 1.** Representatives from federal and state government agencies, US Congressional leadership, private landowners, non-governmental organizations, and adjacent communities visit the Harris River Interpretive Area on Prince of Wales Island, Alaska. (Photo credit: David Harris)

continue to be available for use and enjoyment among forest-dependent communities for current and future generations.

As the USFS and others in the region embrace collaboration as a new way of doing business, it is necessary to view the process as an opportunity for learning. Federal and state agencies, private businesses, and non-profit organizations, among others, all have specific ways of conducting business, and therefore, the approach to business in a collaborative fashion is not seamless. However, the first step is not only for the USFS and others to accept these new methods, but to serve as champions for building partnerships, which must come with flexibility and an open mind. Similarly, it is most helpful when all parties embrace this approach, as collaboration is only successful through dedication and willingness to compromise. While many representatives from environmental organizations, industry, and government agencies are working together to find common solutions and win-win opportunities, others still focus on conventional approaches that have the potential to undermine results of the process – for example, litigation, challenging proposed sales and projects, following outdated rules and procedures, and advocating for congressional mandates that negate agreed-upon solutions. These approaches, while often effective tools for achieving environmental and social benefits, run the risk of reducing the power of collective voice, and could catalyze a return to paralyzing conflict rather than leading toward a future that represents progress.

### **The Path Forward – A New Era of Timber Management**

Looking around the diverse group that stands on Prince of Wales Island during that September 2017 field trip, there is a glimpse of the future of forest management, that involves a range of individuals in management

decisions. They include: community members with knowledge about how the Forest's resources are used and national-level leadership with the power to make instrumental policy changes that affect these individuals' futures; members of the environmental community and owners and operators of the region's remaining timber industry, armed with creative ideas about how to simultaneously improve wildlife habitat and manage the forests for future timber harvest; and USFS regional leadership, District Rangers and on-the-ground specialists ready to roll up their sleeves and work together across disciplines to achieve forest-wide outcomes that truly achieve the USFS multiple use mandate.

These individuals that we find in Alaska represent a dedicated collective voice encouraging outcomes that will benefit the environment and communities alike. The willingness to make change at the ground level, and adapt as needed, represents an opportunity for the future of Southeast Alaska, and lessons for forests throughout the American West. This group realized early on that policy change is not the only solution – complementary recommendations and action at the ground level can catalyze change through adaptive procedures that work. As the invested individuals, organizations, and agencies of the region continue to work together to implement projects and put policy into motion, there truly can be an end to the timber wars that had plagued this place for so long.

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