



My Turn: Home runs: Celebrating Southeast Alaska's salmon forests

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Today is bottom-painting day in our household. Our power troller is out of the water and my partner Eric just left the house with a cup of coffee and his painter's cap on. Like many towns around Southeast, Petersburg is abuzz with spring boat projects. From charter vessels and subsistence skiffs to gillnetters, seiners and trollers, most families are either out working the waters or working hard to get boats ready.

Given the starring role fishing plays in many of our lives, it should come as no surprise to Southeast Alaskans that the biggest cash crop the Tongass National Forest now produces is (drumroll, please) ... salmon.

It's not spruce or yellow cedar; it's salmon.

According to the latest U.S. Forest Service research, wild salmon runs spawned on the Tongass supply 80 percent of Southeast Alaska's commercial harvest and 25 percent of all commercially-caught salmon on the Pacific coast. A full 95 percent of Alaska's pink salmon harvest and 80 percent of our coho are wild runs born and raised on the streams, rivers and estuaries of the Tongass National Forest.

Studies show seafood brings in \$1 billion annually to Southeast communities, and USFS research indicates Tongass-produced fish supply half of all salmon revenue to our region. The numbers don't lie. How regional fish habitat is managed matters to local families like ours.

As a first generation fisherman, Eric invests our fishing income back into our family business every year by making payments on costly permits and improvements to our equipment. We're literally banking on the future of Southeast Alaska's fisheries, so we need fish-friendly forest management on the Tongass.

The Tongass timber program is not exactly a Southeast highliner, bringing in less than two pennies for every dollar produced by salmon and seafood. It costs U.S. taxpayers more in subsidies than it earns for local businesses, up to \$50 million more in the case of the Big Thorne sale on Prince of Wales Island.

I followed the Tongass Advisory Committee's work closely this winter. Their final recommendations (released this week) are a mixed bag. Some gains have been made for fish and wildlife habitat and we like the added protections they've recommended for high fisheries-value watersheds. But with no small mills or fishing groups on the committee, the TAC's work listed hard toward supplying export corporations with the old-

growth “bridge” timber, “aggressive” second-growth volume and \$20 million annually in federal subsidies they need to survive.

Eric and I are also woodworkers who enjoy using local wood. We support selective logging for local use and respect our small sawmills and the entrepreneurs who create jobs by crafting Tongass spruce and cedar into high-end products like guitars and cabins. A diverse and sustainable local wood industry that puts salmon first, and whose viability is based on craftsmanship and not volume, is more likely to gain broad-based support in our region.

Here in Southeast Alaska, the annual migrations of salmon set the rhythm of our communities, nourish our children and allow us to take pride in a strong, rural economy built on sustainable industry. We need forest management that honors salmon — the resource that defines and unifies our region.

There are silver linings in the TAC’s recommendations. They’ve set up a framework for allowing the public more access and influence into timber management than ever before. With salmon tipping the Tongass scales, we can all weigh in and help the Forest Service swap priorities. Why not invest in restoring fish habitat degraded by past logging rather than planning old-growth sales that divide communities? Pulling the hundreds of fish-blocking culverts from old logging roads can employ local people, restore fish habitat and give us direct bang for our buck in boosted returns.

Wild salmon pay the bills and fill the freezer at our house, and we’re thankful for that every day. Since time immemorial, families in Southeast have lived a rich, intertwined co-existence with salmon. In order to protect this unique way of life, we’re working for a sea change in Tongass management. I hope you’ll join me in helping the Forest Service to heed the message their own data spells out: the Tongass is a working forest, we just need to make sure it keeps working for fish.

- Malena Marvin is Executive Director of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and fishes commercially with her partner out of Petersburg.