

Opinion

# Fight to save Alaska's big-tree forests



Originally published December 8, 2017 at 11:45 am *Updated December 8, 2017 at 3:11 pm*



**1 of 2** Middle Island near Sitka, Alaska, is part of the Tongass National Forest. (Lione Clare)

**In their dark-of-night tax plan, Republicans reopened the debate over logging old-growth trees that existed before Alaska became a territory, before the United States became a country.**

By [Brendan Jones](#)

*Special to The Times*

SITKA, ALASKA — The other day I dropped the kids off with the baby-sitter, drove to the end of Indian River Road, shouldered the .30-06 Winchester, and headed into the woods.

It had snowed the night before, wet clumps of it in the moss. About a mile in I shed a layer, pushing through a bramble of devil's club and salmonberry bushes into a glade of

towering old-growth spruce and hemlock. The moss beneath the trees seemed to pulse green, blanketing a root system reaching deep into the earth.



**Brendan Jones** commercially fishes and teaches at the University of Alaska. He is the author of the novel [“The Alaskan Laundry.”](#)

Perching atop a hummock, I nestled the walnut stock into a mound of moss, adjusted the scope to x3, and waited. Breath coming out in white puffs, I inhaled the must of

trees that existed before Alaska became a territory, before the United States became a country.

Just before the holidays, the Senate will vote on whether or not to harvest old-growth stands such as this one from the Tongass National Forest. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, has attached what Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, has called a “poison-pill rider” that rescinds our timber-management plan here in Alaska — the result of years of roundtable work by local tribe members, conservationists and timber executives.

It comes as little surprise. Murkowski, who grew up in Ketchikan, has long been in the thrall of those black and white photos of loggers posing victorious over felled trees. Ketchikan had the last pulp-mill closure in the state 20 years ago, when I first arrived. My town, Sitka, was still reeling from our own 1993 closure — mixing vats drained; gates padlocked; jobs gone, skilled workers at home.

Today, the region has moved on. Fishing and tourism make up the double-barrels of our economy. The Tongass Land Management Plan, which allots 20,000 acres of old-growth spruce, hemlock and cedar to logging in exchange for protection of 77 salmon-producing watersheds, is popular. The Forest Service reviewed more than a quarter million public comments from Alaska and down south, and, in 2016, announced that the Tongass Advisory Committee, made up of a spectrum of different timber interests, had charted the way forward.

Then President Donald Trump came along.

In the gauzy philosophy of “Make America Great Again,” Sen. Murkowski saw an opening. Rather than supporting local loggers, working on sustainable young-growth cuts, she proposed that the Tongass management plan be pushed aside, opening up the last vestiges of old growth for harvest.

## Top Opinion Stories

---

New mayor should take a careful look at city spending | Editorial

---

State ferry system must heed its citizen advisory panels | Op-Ed

---

Because character counts, I am a conservative who cannot support Trump | Bret Stephens / Syndicated columnist

---

The Great Trade War that didn't happen in 2017 | Daniel Moss | Syndicated columnist

---

## Citizens need clarity on school funding before levy votes | Editorial

---

### The case for continued American leadership in Asia | Op-Ed

It is an absurd idea. Just as the fishing industry has modernized to ensure healthy stocks of returning salmon, so timber has evolved beyond cutting these trees. These forests sustain salmon, a billion-dollar industry in the state, those silver torpedoes that fly through the air at Pike Place Market. The trees shelter deer and bear, and traditional Tlingit subsistence plants. We've turned the corner here in the Southeast — it's like trying to breast-feed a baby that's already been weaned.

In addition, there's no way to make an industry great that never was great in the first place. By listening to the same people who gave us the moonscapes of the '70s — no trees to protect salmon streams, no root system to save us from landslides, no forests for tourists to be in awe of — we put our economy at great risk.

ADVERTISING



When I first came to the state, I cut down trees to make a hut for myself, and lived in the woods for a year. I heat my boat with wood, and, as a former member of the Alaska Carpenter's Union and contractor, build with it. I've cleared a hillside of trees for constructing a cabin, dragging up trunks on a chain behind a tractor. Like in the Pacific Northwest, wood is our heritage here in Alaska — timber keeps us warm, keeps us dry.

We are on the brink of moving forward with a responsible timber policy that will preserve the world's largest intact rain forest, as well as our jobs. Now it's Sen. Murkowski's turn to make the transition. Please call her office (202-224-6665) and tell her you oppose this measure. Then call your senator — if she's not it — and request a vote against the Interior Appropriations bill, against the rider rescinding the Tongass plan. Tell them that Alaska is our last chance to do right by these trees.

In 2005, Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Washington, notoriously blocked the late Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens' effort to drill the Arctic when he attached the measure to a bill for defense and Hurricane Katrina recovery. Twelve years later, I hope she can do the same with her fellow senator from the north.

One day I want to take my daughters to this same hummock where I now perch. To sit with them eating wet snow as we scan the forest. To watch the muscles in their necks grow taut as a Sitka blacktail peeks out from behind a hemlock.

There is no going back.

And no one around here wants to, anyway.

*Brendan Jones commercially fishes and teaches at the University of Alaska. He is the author of the novel "[The Alaskan Laundry](#)."*

 [View 40 Comments](#)