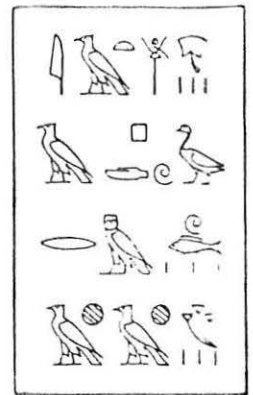


THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

ALASKA CHAPTER

POSITION STATEMENT
OF
THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY
OLD-GROWTH FOREST MANAGEMENT IN COASTAL ALASKA

June 1985



Old-growth forests are a rare, and rapidly diminishing resource throughout North America. Characterized by climax stands with old (more than 300 years), large-diameter trees and snags, productive understories, and structurally diverse overstories, old-growth provides important habitat for many species of wildlife and fish. The coastal forests of southeast and southcentral Alaska represent the last major expanse of old-growth remaining in the United States. In coastal Alaska, over 90 percent of the old-growth occurs on public lands administered by the USDA Forest Service. Most of the remaining old-growth lands are managed by the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources and private Native corporations.

The 16 million acre Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska is the largest National Forest in the United States. Approximately 4 percent of the Tongass (635,000 acres) consists of high-volume, old-growth stands with over 30,000 board feet of timber per acre (30 mbf/acre). These stands, commonly found at low elevations and along broad valley bottoms, are high quality habitat for certain wildlife species; they are also commercially important timberland. The balance of the forestland consists of either noncommercial (less than 8 mbf/acre) or lower volume timber stands (8-30 mbf/acre). These lands are less subject to conflict between logging and wildlife because of their relative abundance and low commercial value.

To date, about 360,000 acres of the Tongass, and 40,000 acres of State and private land have been harvested by clearcutting. About 2 million acres of the Tongass, and an undetermined amount of State and private lands are planned for harvest over the next 100 years. Cutting as scheduled will concentrate on high-volume old-growth, with over half of the forest's highest volume class (greater than 50 mbf/acre) scheduled for harvest over the next 40 years.

Old-growth forest provides important habitat for many species of fish and wildlife throughout southeast and southcentral Alaska. Research over the last 15 years in the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia, and Alaska presents strong evidence that cutting old growth adversely affects black-tailed deer populations, and may impact other species such as marten, river otter, brown bear, mountain goat, moose, bald eagle, blue grouse, several species of cavity-dwelling birds, and some small mammals. The importance of old-growth forest as fish and wildlife habitat has been documented in symposia held in Juneau in 1978 and 1982 and has been reported in numerous publications.

Clearcutting replaces diverse, uneven-aged stands having high habitat value, with clearcuts and even-aged second-growth stands of low diversity and low value for many wildlife species. Based on present knowledge, it is not possible to significantly enhance second-growth for wildlife; 200 to 300 years are needed for second-growth to acquire old-growth characteristics naturally. Old-growth is essentially a nonrenewable resource.

The old-growth rain forests of coastal Alaska represent a unique ecosystem of national significance, deserving of careful and far-sighted planning. Adequate and representative old-growth habitat must be maintained to meet present and future demands for wildlife, fisheries, and recreation. Towards that goal, the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society makes the following recommendations on old-growth forest management in coastal Alaska:

1. Management of the Tongass National Forest should comply with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA).

Although the NFMA was passed by Congress in 1976 and the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP) states, "A revision (of TLMP) will be completed before 1983 to fully implement the requirements of the National Forest Management Act", the provisions of NFMA have not yet been implemented. The NFMA and its Regulations contain important provisions for wildlife and fish resources to achieve full and effective representation in forest planning. These provisions, if applied on the Tongass National Forest now, provide excellent opportunity to serve wildlife and fish planning needs in the revision of TLMP, and in implementation of the revised plan. The Chapter recommends that the Forest Service make full use of provisions contained in the Regulations, so that full compliance with NFMA is achieved as soon as possible.

2. The Forest Service, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and other cooperating agencies should identify the levels of fish and wildlife desired by the public.

The Departments of Fish and Game and Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Forest Service should develop and implement a process which enables the public to identify desired levels of fish and wildlife populations on specific management areas. Public desires must be reflected in resource allocations.

3. The Forest Service and the Department of Fish and Game should develop an education program to inform the public about the long term consequences for wildlife and fish resulting from harvesting old-growth forests in coastal Alaska.
4. The disproportionate harvest of high-volume, old-growth classes should cease.

To maintain the natural diversity of the coastal forest, the proportional harvest of high volume old-growth stands (greater

than 30 mbf/acre) should not exceed the proportional occurrence of those stands on the forest.

5. A cooperative process should be developed by the appropriate resource agencies to identify specific old-growth stands with exceptional fish and wildlife values and specify management direction, including the option of no harvest, to protect those values.
6. The Forest Service and the Department of Natural Resources should improve the accuracy and availability of timber harvest and resource inventory records for public lands.

The Chapter encourages the Forest Service and Department of Natural Resources to develop applications of existing inventory data, and supplement existing data where needed, to adequately serve planning and management needs of wildlife and fish resources.

7. The planning and decision documents of the Forest Service and Department of Natural Resources should display the cumulative effects of forest management on fish and wildlife resources.

Because the impacts of clearcut logging are cumulative over time, land management plans should explicitly address the resource goals and objectives for a given area over the entire rotation period (100 years). Long-term and cumulative impacts of timber management on fish and wildlife resources should be displayed in 5 year operating plans as well as overall forest planning.

8. The Forest Service should incorporate the special management needs of island wildlife populations in management plans throughout coastal Alaska.

Some species occurring on islands have special biological characteristics, such as restricted gene flow, lower genetic diversity, reduced dispersal and immigration rates, and therefore increased vulnerability to the habitat fragmentation brought on by logging. These problems should receive special consideration in forest planning.

9. The Forest Service and the Department of Natural Resources should assess all effects associated with the development and use of road systems on wildlife and fish.

Building roads in undeveloped areas may reduce the value of those areas for certain wildlife species through habitat degradation and human disturbance. These effects need to be explicitly addressed in the planning process. Management of public access should be an integral part of transportation plans. The input of the general public and resource management agencies should be solicited during the development of region-wide and area-specific transportation plans.

10. The U.S. Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Natural Resources should evaluate the economics of all resource uses.

The economic benefits derived from commercial and sport fishing, guiding, hunting, trapping, viewing, and tourism are not presently included in the economic analyses of timber harvest. A process should be developed to evaluate long-term economic costs and benefits for these resource uses as well as for timber harvest.

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society wishes to be formally involved in review of management plans for both State and Federal forest lands throughout coastal Alaska to ensure the plans consider wildlife and fish resources equally with other resources and are consistent with the recommendations stated herein.