

## Examining the “Illusion of Preservation” in Alaska

By Tom Paragi

In the plenary session on resource economics at our 2007 Chapter meeting in Juneau, economist Trista Patterson referenced a provocative paper written by three forest researchers from Harvard University:

[“The illusion of preservation: a global environmental argument for local production of natural resources”](#) by M.E. Berlik, D.B. Kittredge, and D.R. Foster, 2002, *Journal of Biogeography* 29:1557-1568.

Berlik et al. describe how affluent countries with heavy consumption rates often have domestic environmental policies to protect nature, yet these nations import raw materials from developing countries less equipped to extract resources in an environmentally prudent manner. One consequence is greater global environmental degradation (often where species diversity is higher) than would arise if consumption were reduced and a larger proportion of resource extraction came from affluent nations in the North. Their analysis of wood in Massachusetts (the 8<sup>th</sup> most forested state) suggested that currently the 2% of fiber consumption produced in-state could be increased to 50% through aggressive reduction of consumption, effective fiber recycling, and judiciously increased harvest using sustainable practices while still maintaining large forest preserves. Whether it does is another matter, or at least a matter of time.

I am not aware of such detailed calculations for Alaska, which is a crowned jewel of wildlife populations and habitat in a largely undeveloped environment. However, Alaskan resources will be at the center of difficult conservation choices as increasing fuel prices raise the cost of transportation and the price of our currently imported foods, building materials, and other consumer items. We live a long way from the source of many of our imported items. Reckoning of values will occur when costs of many activities and consumer choices tied to fossil fuel prices increase to the point that the heretofore externalized costs of our lifestyles must be internalized.

Community leaders in Alaska are seeing the need to prepare for what may be dramatic changes caused by global processes of nature and human economies. In response, the National Science Foundation is preparing to fund research to forecast the effect of climate change on supply of ecosystem services in the arctic and subarctic. The role of biomass fuels to supplant some consumption of fossil fuels for heat and power production (particularly in villages) is being explored in the boreal forest of the Interior and Southcentral with pilot projects that may be integrated with reducing wildland fire hazards, utilizing logging and milling waste, and enhancing moose browse. On another front, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources is currently reexamining Alaskan agriculture in light of the changing natures of the industry and climate. The extent to which red meat for our growing population will be supplied from domestic livestock, ranching of non-native game, and management of wild ungulates is unknown. The Alaska Chapter should remain abreast of scientific investigations on production of local resources. We should also become engaged in societal discussions about the role of Alaska in conservation of global biological diversity and about the ecological limits to management of renewable resources at high latitudes.