

Cooperative Conservation: Protecting the Economy, Culture and Environment in a Coastal Alaska Community

Cooperative conservation—bridging federal, state, tribal and private interests to achieve conservation goals for the broader public good—is an idea whose time has come, as evidenced by the recent White House conference on cooperative conservation held in August in St. Louis. There are many new and exciting opportunities for cooperative conservation, limited only by our own imaginations and creativity.

However, some of the best opportunities, like the concept of cooperative conservation itself, have been under development for quite some time. One such opportunity lies in the coastal rainforest in the western Gulf of Alaska, on an island whose ecological, economic and cultural significance prompted its protection by presidential executive order more than a decade before the establishment of the National Forest System, whose centennial we celebrate this year.

BACKGROUND

Afognak Island is one of the most spectacular and beautiful islands in Alaska. At more than 740 square miles, it is the second largest island in the Kodiak Archipelago and is located just north of Kodiak itself. The island's rocky coasts, sheltered bays and old growth spruce forests provide unparalleled habitat for the Kodiak brown bear, Roosevelt elk, Sitka black-tailed deer, and more than 160 species of birds. The rivers and streams provide spawning habitat for four species of Pacific salmon, along with steelhead, Dolly Varden trout and arctic char. Its highly indented coastline shelters many marine mammals, such as sea otters, seals, sea lions, and several species of whales that migrate through the area.

By the late 1800s, exploitation of the forests and fisheries of the Kodiak Archipelago by early Russian colonists and American commercial interests had already seriously diminished the salmon populations, and threatened to destroy one of the most productive fisheries in the north Pacific. A rich Native culture derived from the Sugpiak Eskimos and other members of the Alutiiq language group, had utilized these salmon as a primary food source on these islands for at least 7,000 years. The introduction of large-scale commercial techniques, such as setting nets at the mouths of rivers to capture nearly every spawning salmon, sharply reduced reproduction rates and subsequent salmon



Kodiak brown bear (*Ursus arctos middendorffi*) on Afognak Island, Alaska

runs within a matter of a few years.

In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison issued an executive order establishing the Afognak Forest and Fish Culture Reserve to protect salmon spawning habitat and rebuild the depleted fishery. This was only the second use of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, which authorized the president to reserve lands from the public domain for conservation purposes. In 1908, three years after the creation of the U.S. Forest Service and establishment of the National Forest System, Afognak Island was reclassified as part of the Chugach National Forest. In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt

visited the Kodiak Archipelago, and established the 1.9 million-acre Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge to further strengthen habitat conservation in this unique area.

Starting in the 1970s, several major events brought about important changes for forest conservation on these islands. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA) and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) transferred large areas of the Chugach National Forest and the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge to private ownership by newly-created Native corporations. ANCSA transferred more than 400,000 acres of the Kodiak NWR to local Native corporations, including about half of the ecologically critical habitat along the rivers and coasts. ANILCA added 50,000 acres of Afognak Island to the Kodiak NWR, but at the same time removed the rest of the island from the Chugach National Forest and transferred it to Kodiak and Afognak Native corporations.

The intent of these land transfers was to improve the economic self-sufficiency of Native communities. ANCSA and ANILCA contained provisions that limited the authority of Native corporations to sell these lands to other private interests for up to 20 years. Many of the Native corporations turned to the development of timber and mineral resources to provide income. The Kodiak Archipelago is the westernmost extent of spruce forests in Alaska, and although the forest is extensive it is also relatively slow-growing. Extensive areas of 200-400 year-old spruce forest have been harvested, especially during the peak timber prices of the 1990s, and harvesting is continuing to move north-



The Native corporations continued to explore alternatives that would provide a secure economic future for island Natives while maintaining the ecological integrity of these unique resources. One alternative was a federal buy-back of some of the most biologically-sensitive areas. The Native buy-back proposal for Kodiak and Afognak was strongly endorsed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, but cost was a major obstacle. In 1987, the Department of the Interior offered to swap Native corporation lands in exchange for oil and gas royalties from proposed drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The swap was opposed by the State of Alaska, which would lose royalties to the Native corporations. Longstanding environmental opposi-

Ironically, it was one of the outcomes of the Exxon Valdez oil spill that helped overcome the financial obstacles to the federal buy-back of Native corporation lands for habitat conservation. The State of Alaska and the federal government reached a settlement agreement with Exxon in 1991 to create a \$1 billion fund to be used for ecological restoration in

REMAINING SMALLER-TRACT
ACQUISITIONS

While many of the major conser-

vation goals involving the acquisition of large tracts of land have been accomplished, there are several remaining tracts that in spite of their relatively small size are critically important because of the particular ecological features they contain. One such area is at the head of Perenosa Bay, the largest bay on the north side of Afognak Island.

Through the previous land acquisitions, both the east and west sides of Perenosa Bay are now part of Afognak Island State Park. The 45 mile gap that separates them is perhaps the most ecologically critical to protect. Most of the salmon that return to this bay spawn at one major tributary, Paul's Creek, and in the inland freshwater lake that serves as its source. Neither the tributary nor the lake have sufficient protection. In the 1970s, the U.S. Forest Service planned a large timber sale, the Perenosa Sale, just south of Perenosa Bay. After ANILCA and the transfer of these lands from US Forest Service jurisdiction, logging proceeded under the auspices of the Native corporations. This included the construction of 1,000 miles of arterial and secondary roads. To date, timber removal has taken place on over 200,000 acres, and logging by TransPac, a Korean firm, is continuing this year. In some cases, this has diminished elk and deer habitat, particularly their winter range, on the lower elevation lands of the south and central portions of the island, but so far has not reached the watershed the most directly affects salmon spawning habitat at the head of Perenosa Bay.

In 2002, the EVOS Trustee Council recognized the importance of completing the coastal area of this ecosystem, and approved up to \$10.2 million from the Exxon Valdez Habitat Restoration Fund for acquisition of this tract from the Afognak and Koniag Native Corporations. The Department of the Interior also has endorsed this acquisition and the

Alaska State Legislature twice passed receipt authority for federal funds to be used to acquire Perenosa Bay properties from willing sellers. The Native corporations have expressed their willingness to sell these lands, and have agreed to an appraised fair market value on the cost. Thus far, use of oil spill funds for the acquisition has been opposed by the Alaska governor's office, but \$4 million in



private funds and federal coastal wetland funding has materialized to begin finishing the coast line acquisitions. As the gap of remaining land conservation targets gets smaller, a broadbased stakeholder coalition supporting the project is considering another run at oil spill funding. In addition, the State of Alaska recently enrolled in the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy program and the

Alaska Department of Natural Resources has placed North Afognak Island on its short-list of priority areas. Other federal, state and private sources of funds are being approached to help finish the conservation of an area that ranked first among coastal habitat areas for benefiting oil spill injured wildlife out of 1,500 miles of private land impacted by the oil spill.

CONCLUSION

A partnership of conservation organizations including the American Land Conservancy, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Kodiak Brown Bear Trust and the Pinchot Institute is continuing to explore all possible options for completing an agreement to protect this key segment of the landscape, and bridge the gap between state park lands at this integral component of the Perenosa Bay ecosystem. This forest is home to a remarkable concentration of species, and is critical for maintaining the rich biological diversity of northern Afognak Island and its associated marine environment. The acquisition of this tract at the head of Perenosa Bay would create a stretch of over 150 miles of protected coastline on Afognak and nearby Shuyak Island filling the gap between Afognak Island State Park lands to the northwest and northeast.

These partners have joined to seek a practical, broadly supported solution that is developed and supported by a broad diversity of interests locally, regionally and nationally. For the communities in and around Afognak and Kodiak, this is one important link in a still-evolving long-term strategy to restore and maintain the ecological integrity of this unique landscape, which itself plays such a central role in maintaining the economy, culture and quality of life in this corner of Alaska.