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Comments:

I have lived in Alaska since 1962, but the first time I experienced Prince William Sound was in the late 1970's when a friend flew me in with him to a fish hatchery on Esther Island. I was entranced. While he worked, I hiked around, picked berries, and marveled at the scenery.

In the 1980's I was blessed to be able to kayak and boat in the Sound several times a year ("weekend warriors" jumping on the Whittier train for a quick trip to paradise). Fishing, kayaking, hiking, picking berries, spotting whales, playing with phosphorescence in the water, photographing scenery and animals -- Prince William Sound has offered many major highlights of my Alaskan years.

When the Exxon Valdez spilled untold barrels of oil into the precious life-giving waters of Prince William Sound in 1989, I watched the news on T.V. and burst into tears. It was not hard to imagine what damage was being done to the beaches and living creatures in and around the water -- and how impossible it would be to make it all right again. In fact, much of the attempts to clean up were themselves incredibly damaging, both to the environment and to the workers. It was clear no one knew what they were doing.

Now I understand, from people I trust who are more familiar with the details of the complicated management of the Sound, that decisions made this year -- having a lasting impact for the next 15 years -- could create even more devastation. Already, as I kayak in the Sound only once a year, I can easily see many changes: much more traffic, more garbage, and fewer wild animals spotted. The overuse and abuse are clear.

Prince William Sound is a place I feel so strongly about that upon my death I have asked for my ashes to be spread in its waters.

The proposed changes appear to take a big step in the wrong direction, weakening barely adequate protections now in place with vague language promising to create confusion about area management. It contradicts a 1994 Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Recovery Plan and its goals to protect the area's habitat, conservation, and wilderness values.

The Forest Service proposes allowing personal-use timber harvests and new projects that manipulate soils, watersheds and habitat, with almost no standards or guidelines. The changes would threaten the area's current character, which already faces pressure. The Sound's economy rests in fishing, recreation and tourism, but the Forest Service has authorized construction of hatcheries and communication sites, and steady mineral exploration. It is recommending that Congress remove today's protections from some of the Sound's most recreationally and ecologically valuable areas, including Columbia Glacier, Port Wells, Lake Nellie Juan, and Knight, Culross, Esther, Perry, and Glacier Islands. Their reasoning includes allowing mining, helicopter skiing/hiking, and tourism development.

The Forest Service has lost its way. People come to Alaska to experience the wilderness, not more cell phone towers, motorboats, clearcut forests and mines. Prince William Sound is a magnet for those of us who prize these qualities of quiet wilderness, a chance to spot a black bear, an Orca, or a sea otter. The forests and salmon are intimately linked with one another -- one cannot be healthy without the other.

The Chugach National Forest should be protected as strongly as possible for current and future generations.

The original 2-million-acre Wilderness Study Area (WSA) of western Prince William Sound should be recommended to Congress for designation as Wilderness. And until it is congressionally designated as such, the entire WSA should be managed as Wilderness. The Copper River/Bering River area must be protected. The Forest should be withdrawn from mineral and forestry activity, both of which are damaging to wildlife and water quality. Additional protection acquisitions should be identified. Additional Wild and Scenic River designations should be recommended. And the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill (EVOS) Restoration mandate for the region must be upheld.

The U.S. Forest Service has been negligent in managing the WSA for Wilderness values and rather than using this opportunity to remedy their negligence, which has resulted in the degradation of this popular area of Alaska, it now proposes to legitimize this neglect and make it even easier to "manage" a complicated situation with myriad stakeholders. Those of us who prize Prince William Sound for its extraordinary beauty, stunning glaciers, mountains, ancient rainforests, wildlife, and pristine waters -- basically, for its qualities of wilderness of wildness -- feel we are being shunted off to the side to make way for more "important" uses. Preserving Nature, as much as possible, in its original state, is a value that has fewer and fewer opportunities in the world as development and loving Nature to death proceed apace. Please do not waste this precious opportunity.

Prince William Sound is both a recreational and ecological jewel, while also being an economic engine for the entire region. Please, make Wilderness preservation a priority.

Thank you

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