

Wilderness Insights From Alaska: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract—For many reasons, a significant percentage of Alaska's wildlands have been successfully protected. The passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), in particular, represents one of the greatest land protection measures in human history. Numerous important factors have contributed to Alaska's conservation successes, and many of these factors can be used by other nations in achieving and sustaining wilderness areas throughout the world. As in other places, however, Alaska's natural lands and waters face multiple threats and challenges. If we are to continue to experience the significant benefits of wilderness areas and intact ecosystems, these threats and opportunities must be addressed.

Introduction

Alaska contains abundant wilderness areas and intact ecosystems that have been thoughtfully protected as a result of remarkable efforts from literally thousands of people. As hosts of the 8th World Wilderness Congress, it is a pleasure to share the history of these accomplishments, in the hope that our experiences may benefit conservationists, agency personnel, indigenous peoples, and others throughout the world. As in other states, provinces and countries, however, Alaskans are also facing significant threats and challenges to our natural heritage. We know that many of these threats, such as global warming, require coordinated national and international action. To protect Alaska and other great natural places in the future, we must work together to meet these challenges.

Background

For over 100 years, men and women with extraordinary vision have legally protected a significant percentage of Alaska's magnificent natural areas. Currently Alaska, which is greater than 365 million acres (147 million ha) in size, holds over 40 percent of its land in varying degrees of protected status. Most significantly, over 57.9 million acres (23.4 million ha) are congressionally designated wilderness, representing over 50 percent of all federally designated wilderness in the

United States. This wilderness is contained in the following management units in Alaska: National Parks (33.49 million acres/13.55 million ha), National Wildlife Refuges (18.67 million acres/7.55 million ha), and the Tongass National Forest (5.75 million acres/2.32 million ha) (BLM 2003).

More generally, when combining both wilderness and non-wilderness designations, Alaska's National Parks protect a total of 54 million acres/21,853,025 ha (over 65 percent of all national parkland in the United States); Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges protect 70.7 million acres/28.6 million ha (over 83 percent of all national wildlife refuge land in the United States); and Alaska's National Forests contain 22 million acres/8,903,084 ha (representing the two largest National Forests in the United States) (BLM 2003). Other nationally protected areas in Alaska include 3,131 miles (5,039 km) of Wild and Scenic Rivers and two Bureau of Land Management (BLM) protected areas. In addition to these federally designated areas, the State of Alaska has placed some of its most ecologically significant land into state parks and state refuges, totaling 11.3 million acres (4.57 million ha), with 6.5 million of those acres (2.6 million ha) designated as state parks, refuges, sanctuaries, and critical habitat areas (Hull and Leask 2000).

Alaska's conservation success story, however, consists of much more than the numbers of acres that have been protected. Notably, we have sought to honor human relationships with Alaska's lands and waters. This is especially reflected in the subsistence laws and practices that are authorized on federally protected lands (ANILCA Title VIII) and in the recreational and other uses of these lands. The laws governing Alaska also recognize, both explicitly and implicitly, the important economic benefits, ecosystem service benefits, and existence values of protected lands for present and future generations (ANILCA Title I).

As a result, Alaska's intact ecosystems are providing tremendous cultural, economic, and social values. Alaska's rural indigenous peoples are able to subsistence hunt and fish on tens of millions of acres of lands and waters, sustaining one of the most important foundations of their heritage. At the same time, over 26 percent of all jobs in Alaska rely on healthy ecosystems, representing more than 84,000 jobs and providing \$2.5 billion a year in wages and even more contributions to the economy overall (Colt 2001). Key economic sectors that depend on healthy ecosystems include commercial fishing and processing, tourism, subsistence, recreation, and government employment. Our wild places also contribute tremendously to our quality of life and our identity, as reflected in polls that show that over 90 percent of Alaskans believe a healthy environment is necessary for a strong economy and over 70 percent identify themselves as conservationists (Moore 2001).

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Achieving the Protection of Alaska's Wildlands

There have been four primary factors underlying the successful protection of Alaska's wildlands. While each is individually important, these factors have also complemented and reinforced each other. The four factors are: (1) thoughtful stewardship by Alaska's indigenous peoples, (2) bold protection actions by elected and appointed officials, (3) supportive science and scientific analyses, and (4) broad, positive, coordinated, generous, and strategic engagement by the public and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Thoughtful Stewardship by Alaska's Indigenous Peoples

To begin with, Alaska was tremendously fortunate to be well stewarded by its First Peoples for thousands of years. Living in close connection with the lands and waters, Alaska Natives harvested fish and game sustainably, leaving few permanent traces. When the first non-Natives came to Alaska in the 1700s, they encountered robust populations of fish and wildlife and unscathed ecosystems. Because of Alaska's remoteness, few non-Natives lived here until the mid-1900s, and Alaska's indigenous people continued to demonstrate outstanding stewardship.

Bold Protection Actions by Elected and Appointed Officials: Thinking Big, Acting Boldly

The United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. Shortly thereafter, great political leaders, such as President Theodore Roosevelt, began to take bold actions to protect areas in Alaska. From the beginning, these leaders thought in terms of protecting millions of acres; they had a large vision, not small. Among other places, President Roosevelt protected the Tongass and Chugach National Forests. This was an early example of the second basis of Alaska's conservation successes: far-sighted, significant, bold legislative and administrative actions by brave political leaders.

Similarly, when he fought for the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), President Jimmy Carter was instrumental in achieving protection of over 100 million acres (40 million ha) of Alaska lands. By intrepidly invoking the Antiquities Act of 1906, President Carter administratively protected over 50 million acres (20 million ha) until Congress acted. At the same time, Secretary of Interior Cecil Andrus also exercised his regulatory powers through the Federal Land Management Policy Act (FLPMA) to protect tens of millions of additional acres.

At the Congressional level, several great Senators and members of the House of Representatives, including Representative Morris Udall, Representative John Seiberling, and Senator Paul Tsongas, heroically sought national public engagement in the protection of the Last Frontier (Cahn 1982). They knew that to achieve significant land protections—at an ecosystem scale—Congress needed to hear a mandate from citizens throughout the United States. At Congressional field hearings located in numerous states,

Americans from every walk of life testified in unprecedented numbers and demanded that Alaska's unscathed ecosystems be protected for current and future generations.

In the end, Congress passed ANILCA and proclaimed: "It is the intent of Congress in this Act to preserve unrivaled scenic and geological values associated with natural landscapes; to provide for the maintenance of sound populations of, and habitat for, wildlife species of inestimable value to the citizens of Alaska and the Nation, including those species dependent on vast, relatively undeveloped areas; to preserve in their natural state extensive unaltered arctic tundra, boreal forest, and coastal rainforest ecosystems; to protect the resources related to subsistence needs; to protect and preserve historic and archeological sites, rivers, and lands, and to preserve wilderness resource values and related recreational opportunities including but not limited to hiking, canoeing, fishing, and sport hunting, within large arctic and subarctic wildlands and on freeflowing rivers; and to maintain opportunities for scientific research and undisturbed ecosystems" (ANILCA 1980, Section 101(b)). Without doubt, this is one of the boldest, most inspiring statements ever made by a legislative body regarding the protection of wildlands.

Supportive Science and Scientific Analysis

To buttress, substantiate, and, in some cases, spur, many of our great conservation protection actions, Alaska has benefited from outstanding scientific studies, analyses, and vocal support by fish and wildlife and other agency and academic personnel. This third factor in Alaska's success story cannot be overemphasized. The articulate voices of wildlife, wilderness, and ecosystem experts have been pivotal in achieving the conservation of extensive areas. Armed with scientific knowledge and ecosystem-level understanding, men and women in government agencies and universities have often led the way in insisting on large area protections and providing crucial data and mapping capabilities.

Broad, Positive, Coordinated, Strategic and Generous Public and NGO Engagement

Especially in the last 50 years, Alaska has also benefited from broad, coordinated and strategic public engagement, at both the local and national levels. This has been the fourth basis for Alaska's conservation successes. Of importance, as noted above, the support for Alaska's protection has been widespread throughout the United States, at both the grassroots and the "grassstops" levels. Millions of Americans have urged Congress and the White House to protect Alaska, while at the same time a large number of individuals with significant political influence have done the same.

It is noteworthy, indeed, that so many Americans, from Florida to Washington state and from Maine to California, have taken time to write letters, call their Congressmen, and even travel to Washington, DC, on behalf of Alaska. It speaks to the deep passion of the American people for protecting one of the world's last great wild places. It also

reinforces the importance of the word “national” in Alaska’s national parks, national wildlife refuges, and national forests. Everyone in the country has a stake in the future of these publicly owned places, and as a result, everyone has a voice that needs to be heard when making decisions about the protection and management of these lands.

Numerous, effective conservation organizations have helped inform and coordinate these efforts, supported by the contributions of thousands of members, other individuals, businesses, and foundations. This generosity, coupled with the effectiveness of non-profit conservation organizations, has been instrumental in Alaska’s conservation success story. At the same time, the mix of national, state and local organizations working together in a coordinated fashion has also been crucial. In this regard, the Alaska Coalition has served a critical function in coordination and communication, with over 400 groups in the late 1970s and over 900 groups today.

It is also important to note that ANILCA, and many other great conservation achievements in Alaska, have only been realized because conservationists have worked with Alaska Natives in recognizing subsistence rights and needs. Subsistence uses are defined as “the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild, renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, or transportation; for the making and selling of handicraft articles out of non-edible byproducts of fish and wildlife resources taken for personal or family consumption; for barter, or sharing for personal or family consumption; and for customary trade” (ANILCA 1980: Sec.803). Title VIII of ANILCA explicitly protects the rights of rural Alaskans to engage in subsistence hunting and fishing on most federal lands.

In the end, of course, conserving great natural places takes time, perseverance, focus, optimism, and dedication. Conservation representatives, scientists, Alaska Natives, politicians and others spent over 10 years to achieve the passage of ANILCA. Other areas have taken even longer. Is it worth it? The answer to this question is definitively yes, not only for present generations, but also for future generations, and for the intrinsic values of the ecosystems individually and collectively.

Sustaining Conservation Victories and Protections

As every conservationist knows, achieving legal protections for wildlands is the beginning, not the end, of the journey. Conservationists must continue to be vigilant in monitoring against subsequent legal encroachments and detrimental management decisions. For the most part, Alaska conservationists have been successful in this regard, for five major reasons: (1) constant vigilance, (2) supportive funding, (3) outstanding coordination and communication among conservation groups, (4) making the case for protection, and (5) creating champions.

Constant Vigilance

First, there has been tremendous vigilance. Instead of relaxing after an area has been protected, Alaska-based

and national conservationists have sharply maintained their focus on defense. We often use the phrase, “constant vigilance, constantly applied.” There has always been so much at stake, as many powerful challengers and threats have arisen. While constant vigilance has meant an ongoing, high level of commitment and effort, it has also meant that virtually all of Alaska’s conservation victories have been maintained.

Supportive Funding

To sustain this level of effort has required a steady flow of funding. Fortunately, individual contributors from across the United States have understood this and have continued to be loyal and generous. Far-sighted foundations and businesses have also been instrumental in funding the analyses, outreach, litigation, administrative work, and communications necessary to uphold the initial victories. In this regard, it is important to remember that to obtain funding, you must ask, year after year, and continue to present a compelling case.

Coordination, Collaboration, Cooperation Among Conservation Groups

To make a compelling case, it is important to demonstrate that the groups working to protect an area are operating together in a complementary fashion, without duplication of effort. In Alaska, there has been excellent coordination, communication, and collaboration among conservation groups, at both the state and national levels. This is the third important factor in Alaska’s success.

Making the Case

It is also crucial that advocates for protection continue to make a compelling argument for safeguarding an area, and broadcast that case effectively using all available means of communication. Alaska conservation advocates have done this well, using web sites, list serves, films, books, member magazines, and newsletters, while also working closely with all segments of the media. As we learn more about the importance of natural systems, and as these systems become more scarce and valuable, we have an even stronger case for their continued protection.

Creating Champions

Finally, Alaska has been successful in maintaining its protected lands because we continue to create new champions in two ways. Conservation organizations and others have repeatedly invited political decision makers to Alaska to show them, first-hand, what is at stake. There is no substitute for a direct experience, whether it be standing on fragrant, spongy tundra, while hundreds of caribou run across a nearby hill; or catching a salmon on a pristine icy river, while eagles fly overhead. Alaskan conservationists have also recognized the importance of cultivating youth and nurturing their leadership skills and enthusiasm, both at the high school and college level. Through college intern

programs and an outstanding project called Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, diverse numbers of young people are bringing fresh enthusiasm and insights to the efforts to defend Alaska's wildlands.

Major Threats

Going forward, there are many serious threats to Alaska's wildlands and intact ecosystems. Even though Alaska is experiencing some of these especially intensely, these are threats that, if unaddressed, will also imperil other wildlands throughout the world.

Global Warming

I firmly believe that global warming poses the single greatest threat to the wildlife and wildlands of Alaska, the nation, and the world that we have ever faced. Global warming also jeopardizes the indigenous peoples who rely on our wildlife and wildlands.

No place in the United States has warmed more than Alaska: over 4 degrees F in the last four decades, with our winters warming over 7 degrees F during the same period. The adverse ecological and human impacts are being felt across the state. These have been well documented by scientists, Alaska Native elders, and others (ACIA 2004).

The adverse consequences of global warming are too extensive to list in full here, but selected examples are illustrative. Lakes and wetlands are drying up, reducing habitat for migratory birds and other animals (O'Harra 2005a). Alaska has experienced unprecedented forest die-offs from spruce bark beetles and other insects and diseases. In the last two years, Alaska has had devastating forest fires, with the 2004 season breaking all records when over 6.7 million acres (2.7 million ha) burned. Ecologically critical ice sheets are thinning and retreating, while on land, permafrost is melting. If current melting trends continue, the entire Arctic Ocean is projected to be ice-free during the summers well before the end of the century (O'Harra 2005b). Many animal species are in jeopardy, most notably polar bears and other ice dependent species like ring seals. These and other species are at serious risk of being displaced or losing their habitat altogether. If extensive warming continues, extinctions for many species are easily predicted (ACIA 2004).

All of these global warming consequences affect not only the plants and wildlife in Alaska, but also the people who rely on those plants and animals for their subsistence way of life. Humans are also adversely impacted by global warming, from the spread of diseases to crumbling infrastructure, all of which will cost billions of dollars to address. Very recently, for example, due to a severe, unusually fierce fall storm with waves 10 ft (3 m) above normal high tide, Nome lost 20 ft (6 m) of beach (Holland 2005).

In short, Alaska—right now—is unequivocally demonstrating dramatic, adverse, scientifically measurable, and readily observable effects of loading our atmosphere with an excess of greenhouse gases. Alaska is the canary in the mine; the melting tip of the iceberg; the Paul Revere of global warming: "The BTUs are coming!!" We must cap emissions immediately if we are to save our arctic and other ecosystems in the long run. This is a national and international imperative.

Two Other Threats

In this paper, I will briefly list two other major threats that Alaska, in particular, is facing: (1) persistent organic pollutants, and (2) 19th century thinking versus 21st century solutions.

Persistent organic pollutants migrate from many different sources to Alaska, using a diverse array of transporters including air, water, and animals. These toxic compounds are bioaccumulated in higher trophic species such as whales, seals, and polar bears, raising concerns about the health and reproductive capabilities of these species and human consumption (AMAP 2002). Like global warming, the global transport of toxic chemicals underscores our international inter-dependence, regardless of where we live, and the widespread consequences to our wildlands of behaviors that are destructive and unsustainable.

Alaska is also threatened by 19th century thinking that stands in the way of 21st century solutions. The rush to drill the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a prime example. Instead of spearheading 21st century efforts to conserve energy, promote energy efficiency, and enhance alternative energy production, the 19th century mindset of drilling for oil, at any cost, prevails among the current Administration and Alaska's Congressional delegation. Drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or in other protected wildlands will not, of course, have any meaningful impact on America's energy needs or on America's energy dependence. The United States has only 3 percent of the world's oil reserves, yet consumes 25 percent of the world's oil. If we are to bequeath our children an earth rich in wildlands, we can and must demand that our elected officials engage in 21st century thinking, 21st century solutions, and 21st century ecosystem and ecological services knowledge and appreciation.

Lastly, I would also like to note an overall concern about the risk of detachment from our wildland roots. Similar to so many other places in the world, America is becoming more urbanized. If people become disassociated from, or even worse, alienated from, wilderness, then it will be harder to justify the protection of wildlands based on experiential, spiritual, and existence value rationales.

Opportunities

Fortunately, there are many opportunities to affirm and expand the protection of wildlands. I will briefly discuss three present opportunities: (1) growing understanding about the value and economic importance of protecting wildlands and biodiversity, and the costs of not doing so; (2) renewed commitment to future generations and intergenerational equity; and (3) expanded involvement by diverse constituencies.

Protection Values

As people throughout the world watched the devastation from Hurricane Katrina, it became increasingly clear that this catastrophe was both a natural and a human-enhanced disaster. The wreckage in Katrina's wake underscored, in dollars and human suffering, the costs of destroying wetlands, forests, and natural rivers, as well as the costs associated

with global warming. The graphic lesson from Katrina and several other recent disasters is that destroying wildlands and disrupting ecosystem services is very expensive in real dollars and human misery.

As economists and others expand their understanding about the monetized values of ecosystem services, it is critical that this be communicated clearly to the general public. We need to publicize success stories as well as explain catastrophes, using teachable moments wherever possible. The insurance industry can be an important ally in this effort. In addition to ecosystem services, it is equally important to value direct and secondary employment benefits from wildlands. There is excellent work being done in this regard. As noted above, the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) successfully quantified in economic terms many of the employment and other benefits from intact ecosystems in Alaska (Colt 2001). Personally, I presented a speech throughout Alaska explaining these impressive income and ecosystem services statistics, and received an amazingly positive response from Chambers of Commerce and Rotary Clubs. We must redouble efforts to generate this information and disseminate it widely.

Intergenerational Equity

While it is very important to define and discuss the economic benefits of wildlands protection, it is equally important to explain the value-basis of our intergenerational equity responsibilities. Very simply, what kind of world are we leaving for our children and grandchildren, and how does that compare to the world that we inherited from our ancestors? As a corollary, do we have any right to leave future generations a diminished planet, a planet with fewer wildlands, less biodiversity, compromised ecosystem services, and less wilderness? By any ethical standards, the answer is no. Accordingly, we must be responsible stewards, not hedonistic, unsustainable consumers of the earth's resources. The spiritual, intrinsic, ecological and other values of wilderness can only be bequeathed if these areas are carefully protected by us.

We should talk proudly about intergenerational equity. This is a fundamental value that is critical to the long-term survival of our species. We have the opportunity and the need to invoke this tremendously important value more frequently.

Diversification

To protect ecosystems and wilderness areas in the long run, we must maintain a majority view that safeguarding wildlands is appropriate, desirable, or, better yet, necessary. Accordingly, we must continue to diversify the ethnic and cultural support base for ecosystem protection.

Every culture has its special relationship with the natural world. It is important to recognize this, celebrate it, and share it with others. In Alaska, we created the "Guide to

Alaska Cultures" as a starting point for understanding the histories and relationships that different cultures have to our state and its wildlands (Alaska Conservation Foundation 2004). This successful publication is now used by the Anchorage School District as a text for the required course, Alaska Studies.

Conclusion

For all of us in Alaska, it has, indeed, been an honor to host the 8th World Wilderness Congress. We hope that Alaska has provided and will continue to offer helpful insights and inspiration to those who attended the Congress and to those who are reviewing the Proceedings. As wildlands become scarcer, more imperiled, and more valuable, the job of protecting wilderness areas is more vital than ever. In closing, I want to thank all members of the international community who are dedicating their lives and careers to safeguarding wildlands. Whether it is through science, economics, advocacy, management, governance, writings, cultural understanding, photography, or other endeavors, every effort strengthens the likelihood that future generations will be able to experience the extrinsic and intrinsic values of wilderness areas that are essential to our survival, well being, and identity. There is much to do, but together, we will succeed. We must.

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