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Southeast Alaskans Want Food Sovereignty and Reimagined Rural Futures

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ABSTRACT

United States federal lands are managed for multiple conservation, social, and commercial goals shaped by the visions of diverse interest groups. The rural economic and food-security needs of local public-lands-based communities have important implications for sustainable natural-resource management but can be obscured by national-scale public comment processes. To better understand local concerns and aspirations for management of the nation's largest national forest, the Tongass, we use thematic analysis of public testimonies provided by Southeast Alaska community members as part of the federally mandated Roadless Rulemaking Subsistence Hearings in 2019. The six themes we develop explore speakers' views of an Alaska exemption from the 2001 Roadless Rule, Alaska Native and rural community connections to the forest ecosystem, visions for rural futures, and concerns with the rulemaking process. Explicit consideration of local economic, food sovereignty, and federal rulemaking concerns can inform a broader picture of federal land management.

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Introduction

In Southeast Alaska, the 17-million-acre (6.9-million-ha) Tongass National Forest has long been shaped by the visions of commercial recreation and tourism, fishing, mining, and logging-based actors (Nie 2006; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2016). In the homeland of Lingít (Tlingit), Haida, and Tsimshian peoples, rural residents depend upon wild-harvest foods derived from federal and nonfederal lands (Fall 2016; Newton and Moss 2009), not only for nutrition but also as a connection to ways of life that have been permanently altered by the dispossession of indigenous lands (e.g., Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn 2011). Consequential decisions such as the federal Roadless Area Conservation Rule on Forest Service lands (U.S. Department

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of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2001) take place in government offices and courtrooms, whereas local communities face the immediate and long-term outcomes of these decisions on local landscapes, and in their bank accounts and freezers (Natcher et al. 2016; Szymkowiak and Kasperski 2021). Public commenting may collect thousands of written responses and provide national-scale opportunities for participation in land governance (Germain, Floyd, and Stehman 2001; Steelman 1999). Corporations and nonprofit organizations may exert significant lobbying and media pressure on policy makers for such causes as wilderness designation, timber, or species-specific conservation, while the concerns of residents are heard only at scattered in-person public hearings and recorded as transcripts that may or may not be digested at headquarters.

In this article, we draw attention to the testimony of Southeast Alaskans, as provided during the Federal Roadless Rulemaking Subsistence Hearings in 2019, to demonstrate that local claims to the Tongass cannot be summarized as "conservationist" or "pro-timber" positions. Speakers at the hearings advocated for land-use policies that would provide local benefits, benefits not provided by either the 2001 Roadless Rule or a significant expansion of commercial logging. Local land use claims are often coded as a desire for "subsistence," with an accompanying measurable–and minimal–economic value. These testimonies make clear that use of federal land for gathering food, medicines, and other goods is a connection to culture and lifeway. Measures to place input from local residents on par with that of much more numerous but less affected U.S. citizens and entities from far away could advance equitable and sustainable forest management.

As biodiversity conservation, rural wellbeing, and climate change adaptation and mitigation concerns intensify (Davis et al. 2018; Dreiss and Malcom 2022), the goals of local communities merit renewed attention in natural-resource scholarship to inform governance and democratic outcomes and to contextualize efforts to expand resource-based commercial industries, including logging (Davis et al. 2018; Goetz, Partridge, and Stephens 2018; Hibbard and Lurie 2013). Little attention has been paid to federal land policy affecting less economically measurable uses, such as food and Native food sovereignty. The extent to which U.S. households rely on public lands for food is poorly understood (Emery and Pierce 2005). Public lands sustain both informal and commercial food and fiber systems, including gathering and foraging of wild fungi, berries, and plants, harvesting of wood for cultural uses, as well as hunting, trapping, fishing, and livestock grazing (Emery and Pierce 2005; Kruger 2005; Natcher et al. 2016; McLain 2005). Commercial harvests are well documented. Johnson et al. (2019) estimate the annual commercial harvest of salmon derived from Alaska's national forests at USD 80 million. Wild-harvest resources reduce food insecurity and improve health outcomes, and are under-recognized as a legitimate form of economic activity by agencies (Chan et al. 2006; Natcher et al. 2016; Newton and Moss 2009). However, labeling food-gathering practices as simply economic activities obscures both the cultural context of gathering, preparing, and eating those foods and the land management practices that propagate them.

Issues of food security are particularly impactful for indigenous communities in the US, where the history of settler colonialism and land dispossession systematically served to sever the ties between indigenous peoples and their relations with the land and Native foods (Estes 2019; LaDuke 2017; Norgaard 2019). As a U.S. territory until

the mid-20th century, the colonial legacy in Alaska is palpable (Haycox 2002; Kimmerer and Lake, 2001). In Southeast Alaska, state and federal lands include traditional sites for hunting, fishing, carving, and gathering activities essential to the Alaska Native way of life (Cerveny 2007, 2008). Scholars of indigenous environmental justice describe the process by which federal land designation and continued custodial stewardship has contributed to persistent rural poverty and dispossession (Catton 1994; Spence 1996; West 1994). While the removal of indigenous and rural peoples from natural resource systems is one avenue for dispossession, other processes of what Bacon (2019) refers to as "eco-social disruption" are more subtle, such as the regulation of harvests and spatial-temporal restrictions to resource access that can inhibit harvest. In a study of national parks in northwest Alaska, indigenous subsistence harvesters identified embedded power asymmetries, lack of engagement opportunities, and structural barriers built into the regulatory systems as impediments to Alaska Native sovereignty over resource stewardship (Green et al. 2022).

In Alaska, the practice of "subsistence" is federally protected and managed for rural residents on federal lands under the 1980 Alaska National Interest Conservation Act (ANILCA) and by Alaska Department of Fish and Game for rural residents on state lands (see: U.S. Department of the Interior [US DOI] (2015)). Alaskan rural subsistence law enables specially regulated harvest for certain qualified rural residents under ANILCA, while the State of Alaska's constitution gives all residents of Alaska the opportunity for subsistence, provided they meet certain conditions. Fall (2016) estimated that rural Alaskans harvested 134 kg (295 pounds) of noncommercial fish and game per person in 2012, relative to urban Alaskans' 10 kg (22 pounds) per person. Rural subsistence users are not necessarily Alaska Native, though many Southeast Alaska communities are predominantly Alaska Native. For them, rights to harvest do not translate to food sovereignty (Griffin 2019). federal vegetation management planning, for example, largely falls outside of the subsistence co-management process.

Local people have complex knowledge and aspirations regarding lands managed by federal and state entities. Local people are economically and ecologically interdependent with wildland ecosystems over long timeframes that often predate federal management (Naves et al. 2019; Thornton and Hope 2020; West 1994). Local communities demand to be heard in decision-making processes and seek to have their goals enacted on the landscape (LaDuke 2017; Scobie, Finau, and Hallenbeck 2021), but these demands are diverse and context-dependent, not easily summarized in media campaigns or form letters (Brügger, Morton, and Dessai 2015; Dreiss and Malcom 2022). Various communities, especially indigenous peoples, have actively organized to maintain or regain access to their lands and food systems (Hormel and Norgaard 2009; LaDuke 2017; Scobie, Finau, and Hallenbeck 2021). Occasionally these efforts grab national attention, such as the attempts to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Reservation in the 2010s (Estes 2019). More often, local land claims are heard only in official records of public comment to federal management proposals, such as those documented here.

This article aims to broaden our knowledge of local concerns for federal land management with attention to local impacts. We summarize the perspectives of local peoples on proposed changes to U.S. national forest administrative policy, as provided by community members from across Southeast Alaska in federal hearings conducted

by the U.S. Forest Service, as required by ANILCA (Section 805). Below we outline the case context, describe the process of federal roadless rulemaking, and report our results.

Southeast Alaska Social-Ecological Context

Southeast Alaska is wet, temperate, forested, and rugged (Figure 1).

The cultures and economies are shaped by the stable ecological character of the region, the foundation of which rests on marine and coastal temperate rainforest ecosystems. The forest landscape occurs over complex terrain set in a cool perhumid climate, which together with nearby forests in British Columbia constitutes the largest temperate rainforest in the world (DellaSala et al. 2011). Forest streams support five species of Pacific salmon (*Oncorhynchus* spp.) that are important to the region's social fabric, and which transport marine nutrients to forest watersheds when they return from the ocean to spawn in the freshwaters of their origin (Quinn 2018). The ecosystem also provides habitat for the Alaskan brown bear (*Ursus arctos middendorffi*), American goshawk (*Accipiter atricapillus*), Alexander Archipelago wolf (*Canis lupus ligoni*), and the Sitka black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*). The deer specifically depend on old-growth tree cover to survive high-snowfall winters (Hanley and McKendrick 1985; Smith 2016).

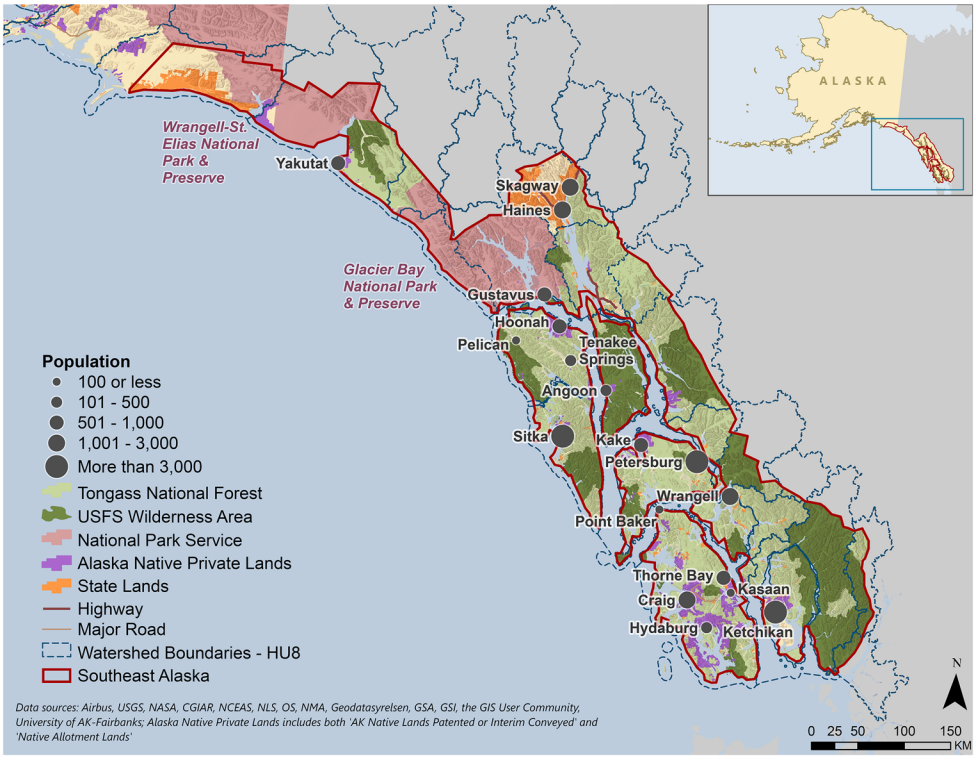

Figure 1. Southeast Alaska communities participating in Federal Roadless Rulemaking Subsistence Hearings, with land management agency boundaries. Map design by A. Kaminski.

The Tongass National Forest constitutes approximately 80% of Southeast Alaska. Federal lands are tax-exempt, which greatly reduces the tax revenue of local government entities. The region also includes lands managed by Alaska Native corporations, the State of Alaska, the National Park Service, and private owners (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2016). Today approximately 72,000 people live in 32 communities across the region, three of which are accessible by road (AKDL 2023, Supplement 1). Millions of visitors and thousands of non-local seasonal workers are attracted to the region each year (Cerveny 2008; Huber-Stearns, Santo, and Steinkruger 2020). Intra-regional transportation is primarily provided by ferry service under the Alaska Marine Highway System, regional air carriers, or private boats and planes.

The timber industry was historically a dominant driver of land-management priorities and socioeconomic conditions in the region (Haycox 2002). A post-World War II logging boom sustained multiple communities and large-scale pulp mills operated in Ketchikan and Sitka from 1954–1997 and 1959–1993, respectively (Durbin 2005). Historical logging was concentrated in relatively accessible old-growth stands (Albert and Schoen 2013).

On the Tongass, prolonged struggles among conservation advocates and logging interests have spawned multiple generations of advocacy and litigation, becoming both an iconic and intractable conflict (Nie 2006). With increased regulatory oversight of public-lands management, the environmental movement tallied small but important successes: logging buffers around streams and goshawk nests, more restrictive timber-project requirements (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 1997), and the implementation of the 2001 Roadless Rule (Durbin 2005). The 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule limits road development on approximately 9.3 million acres (3.8 million ha) of the Tongass National Forest, affecting 188,000 acres (76,000 ha) (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2001) that would otherwise be available for timber harvest. The rule reflects the consequences of reduced public support for old-growth logging and an increased focus on conservation.

Logging in the Tongass National Forest continues on timber lands outside of inventoried roadless areas, with harvest patterns shifting based on the markets for sawn logs and softwood log exports (Daniels, Paruszkiewicz, and Alexander 2016). Of the 643 million board feet (1.5 million m^3) harvested across Southeast Alaska between 2011–2017, 38% was harvested from the Tongass National Forest, whereas 48% and 15% were harvested from Alaska Native Corporation and state lands, respectively (Huber-Stearns, Santo, and Steinkruger 2020).[1]

There is still strong support from industry groups and corporations to re-start a large-scale timber industry in Alaska, however. Following a petition from the State of Alaska in 2018, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Purdue instructed the Forest Service to begin developing a new roadless rule for Alaska (aka the Alaska Roadless Rule, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] (2020)). Per the rulemaking process, six alternatives spanning a conservation-development continuum were proposed, with Alternative 1 representing no change and Alternative 6 fully exempting the Tongass National Forest from the 2001 Roadless Rule (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2020). Intermediate options included a mix

of new and old designations, including the establishment of "community priority" areas that would allow limited road development to facilitate micro-scale forestry, cultural uses, and wild harvesting. The USDA selected Alternative 6 and in October 2020, "discontinued the 2001 Roadless Rule regulation's prohibitions on timber harvest and road construction within inventoried roadless areas" (Eichman 2020).

After taking office in January 2021, President Biden ordered the review of all regulations from the prior four years that "may conflict with protecting the environment and to immediately commence work to confront the climate crisis" (Executive Order 13990). In response to the presidential order, the USDA proposed a repeal of the 2020 Alaska Roadless Rule that would "return the Tongass National Forest to management under the provisions of the 2001 Roadless Rule" (Eichman 2020), and the Biden administration enacted those changes in early 2023, thereby prohibiting road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest across roadless areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2023).

Wild Harvest and Food System Dynamics

The regulatory frameworks that govern harvests and land use in Southeast Alaska are embedded in the colonial history of Alaska (Durbin 2005; Haycox 2002). Since 1990, federally-eligible rural subsistence users are regulated by the multi-agency Federal Subsistence Board, which takes regional advisory committee recommendations into account and meets regularly to manage hunting and fishing resources (U.S. Department of the Interior [US DOI] 2015). Alaska Native communities, in particular, continue to advocate for access to hunting, fishing, gathering, and wood so as to maintain vital relationships, language, and connections to culture, heritage, and place (Johnson et al. 2021).

The practices regulated by state and federal agencies as "subsistence" constitute a way of life for Alaska Native communities seeking to continue their customary and traditional practices (Dombrowski 2007). For example, memory of displacement from traditional hunting and fishing access on the 3 million acres (1.2 million ha) that are now Glacier Bay National Park shapes a contemporary conversation about food sovereignty and self-determination in the village of Huna (Cerveny 2007, 2008). The daily practice of eating is inextricably linked to the knowledge, social processes, and land management practices that propagate desired species and enable subsistence harvests and wild food preparation (see: Dombrowski 2007). These processes are based on principles of sharing and reciprocity (Dombrowski 2007).

Methods

In 2019, as part of developing the Alaska Roadless Rule and as required by ANILCA, the Forest Service Alaska Region staff gathered 196 oral testimonies and one letter in 18 Southeast Alaska communities during a 60-day comment period. These testimonies extended across communities as large as Ketchikan (population 13,948 in 2020), to as small as Point Baker (population 12 in 2020), and with a range in Alaska Native populations, from 0% in Point Baker to 69% in Hydaburg (U.S. Census Bureau 2020;

Table 1. 2019 Roadless rulemaking subsistence hearings locations and number of speakers.

Community	Number of testimonies	Community	Number of testimonies
Angoon	11	Pelican	14
Craig	7	Petersburg	12
Gustavus	9	Point Baker	7
Haines	6	Sitka	40
Huna	16	Skagway	8
Hydaburg	10	Tenakee Springs	10
Kake	8	Thorne Bay	4
Kasaan	3	Wrangell	8
Ketchikan	15	Yakutat	5

Alaska Department of Labor 2022 see Supplement 1, Table 1). These testimonies were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist (Table 1). After transcription was complete, we gained access to the data and initiated a thematic coding process.

In 2021, we assembled a multidisciplinary author team with expertise in geography and anthropology, natural resource social science, economics, forest and fish ecology, and political science from federal, state University and private sector backgrounds. We discussed our positionalities explicitly in a team meeting. Influential aspects of these include that we are all white researchers/academics without first-hand experience living in a subsistence economy. While three of us had extensive research experience in Alaska communities, we are all "outsiders" to the process and needs of those communities. Our team includes many federal US researchers, which limits our ability to make recommendations for policy change. Our backgrounds shaped our choice of research topic, use of thematic analysis with social and ecological lenses, and our choice of theoretical framing. For the lead author, working with this dataset was a deep professional honor.

Thematic Analysis

These public data were not subject to human-subjects ethics review, though we sought to enhance ethical scholarship by analyzing data in a theoretically- and locally-informed context and by practicing established methods for trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985). We analyzed the transcripts by listening to audio files, open-coding the transcripts, and then applying a thematic analysis technique to produce six themes (Nowell et al. 2017). The first three authors discussed the process as a team and compared our coding results to enhanced intercoder reliability. However, our findings are not triangulated with further interviews.

Member Checking

The hearing data were collected in person by the U.S. Forest Service and analyzed in 2020–2021. During this time, COVID-19 travel restrictions prevented us from conducting participant observation or additional interviews to triangulate our findings. To conduct member checking for our analysis, we composed a complete draft of the study manuscript and a feedback worksheet to guide community member review. In the spring of 2021, we emailed these documents to every individual who spoke at the hearings who also left an email address on the sign-in sheet, including to the Southeast

Alaska Subsistence Regional Advisory Council and other key contacts in the community known to us. We hosted two open virtual meetings and fielded phone calls from individuals and recievedfour comments. After we revised the manuscript in 2022/2023, the Juneau U.S. Forest Service research lab line officer facilitated a request for additional feedback from Southeast Alaska communities with focus on the tribal governments that participated in the rulemaking process as cooperating technical partners, select Southeast Alaska Subsistence Regional Advisory Council members, and the Pacific Northwest Research Station's tribal liaison. This resulted in six additional comments. We incorporated edits to the greatest extent possible into the final manuscript.

Results

Testimonies from Southeast Alaskans

Testimonies came from local government and tribal representatives, youth, nonprofits, conservation advocacy groups, and local citizens speaking on their own behalf or in proxy for someone else (see Table 1). Forest Service staff allowed the public to speak on any topic for their allotted time during the hearings. Each hearing was two hours, and each speaker was permitted an equal proportion of that time as determined by the number of speakers present each evening). No representatives of state or federal agencies, regional corporations, or the large-scale logging or milling industry spoke. Forest Service staff observed state and industry officials seated quietly in the hearing rooms.

Themes from Testimonies

We developed six themes from the testimonies that highlight the interconnection among local peoples and forest management. Below we present the themes with illustrative quotations, followed by thematic discussion.

Broad Opposition to Full Exemption from the 2001 Roadless Rule

While many those who testified were ambiguous about their specific preference among the six alternatives, there was broad opposition to fully exempting Alaska from the 2001 Roadless Rule, and general support for Alternative 1 (e.g., the no action alternative). A total of three individuals (out of 196 testimonies) testified in support of Alternative 6, the full exemption alternative, and two of these stated that they wanted more road-based access to subsistence hunting and fishing. They also discussed the desire for local control of land-management decisions. Daryl James of Yakutat noted (Yakutat transcript, p 4):

> The use of the land is very important to me and the freedom to do so. I've watched changes through a few years and each change brings more shackles of restriction. […] There's a need for access by ATV or some other access that we need to discuss among ourselves. We need to make decisions at the local level, not imposed from outside sources. That's what we've seen in the last few years is imposed from outside sources.

Many of the individuals who spoke in favor of keeping the 2001 Roadless Rule intact recognized the importance of road-based travel across the region and noted economic conditions under past logging booms.

Alaska Native Way of Life and Sovereignty

Testimony by Alaska Native community members was given in support of the Alaska Native way of life. These testimonies largely opposed changes to the 2001 Roadless Rule that would result in negative impacts on the forest ecosystem. These speakers made clear, as Frank Wright did (Huna transcript, p 11), that the changes to the 2001 Roadless Rule would threaten a way of life interdependent with forest wellbeing because "We are part of the forest." Additionally, Lee Wallace read from a resolution from the Organized Village of Saxman (Ketchikan transcript, p 7):

> We, the people of the Tongass, the Haida, the Lingit, the Tsimshian, have been here for 10,000 years and more. We want our forest intact and healthy. The existence of our way of life depends on it. The federal government calls it 'subsistence'. I personally don't like using the word. I use 'our way of life'. We need a healthy forest to practice our cultural identity. Hunting, fishing, harvesting off the land and the water is vital to us.

Alaska Native speakers marked the distinction between their way of life and "subsistence", a word used by federal and state regulators to define and regulate harvests, per ANILCA. In this usage, the term "subsistence" is defined by federal and state regulation as traditional and customary practices, hunting and fishing, and trade[2] in Alaska. Saadutts Peele (Hydaburg transcript, p 22) marked the challenges of both regulatory and seasonal variability: "We eat good here in Hydaburg, but it's getting harder and harder to do these things, being challenged by the law or the timing."

These testimonies articulated the importance of harvest activities in connecting generations through harvesting traditions and responsibility to sustain traditional relations and lifeways for generations to come. These speakers made the link between proposed changes in the 2001 Roadless Rule and a longer history access regulation and land use that constrain Alaska Native food sovereignty and lifeways. Speakers called for increased Alaska Native access to these resources, denounced specific licensing, harvest limits and called for Alaska Native food sovereignty. Saaduuts Peele (Hydaburg transcript, p 20) said:

> We have an obligation to leave something for our children, the young people, to teach them subsistence. Not have to fight not to get one red snapper, not to get one and to be hounded and think we need licenses. That is absurd. We should not have to get licenses period.

Community Dependence on the Forest

Speakers articulated the importance of the Tongass ecosystem to health and wellbeing. Below, the entire testimony from Tenakee Springs resident Stanley Wilson highlights this vital role of fishing in his life:

> I'm concerned about the subsistence resources being affected by the Roadless Rule. I understand that there could be mining involved with this and that's a definite detriment to salmon and any other fish. I'd just like to see it protected because my life depends on it because I only get a pittance every month from the government on Social Security. We also are losing the ferry, which means we can't—that is our grocery supply and this is not happening now at least until March and then it's going to be shut off again next year. So, it's very important that we are able to harvest these resources.

Harvesting forest foods and materials was described as "why we live here," for those who "don't fit anywhere else."

Speakers also raised the global value of the Tongass as a "global lung" or "life support system," and repeatedly spoke of its place as a globally significant ecosystem supporting biodiversity and acting as a "carbon sink."

Lessons from the Past

Community members spoke from experience about the implications of a logging-based economy in their region as they weighed the benefits and costs of repealing 2001 Roadless Rule protections. X'aasánk' (Jacob W. Pratt III) who had experience as a logger and working in forest restoration, noted (Huna transcript, p 31): "My heart is torn in between two things. In between the logging and making a road for logging and knowing that, it's been said, everything has a spirit." Likewise, K'yuuhlgaansii hin uu dii kuyaang (Frederick Olsen, Jr.) (Sitka transcript, p 10) reflected: "There's going to be one last boom, one last big payday and the rest of us have to pay for it for the rest of our lives and our grandchildren's grandchildren's lives."

Speakers discussed forest-management relationships including: 1) forest succession dynamics and herbivore ecology and the effects of fragmentation, logging and development on wildlife and fish populations. For example, one speaker described the forest-successional dynamics following clear-cut logging as "successional debt," explaining how second-growth forest dynamics first include an extended period of dense, homogeneous forest structure and canopy closure that reduces understory forage resources for Sitka black-tailed deer and also limits key winter cover for deer during heavy snowfall.

The testimonies also describe social lessons from a logging-dominated economy, referencing past experiences and the current condition of their communities. They noted that logging and pulp mill-based employment had provided stable income for many families for a generation, but that long-term prosperity from another boom seemed unlikely. Some argued that more logging-based activity would result in increases in crime and violence against women.

Envisioning a Different Future

Speakers also described their desires for the future of Southeast Alaska. They argued that the commercial logging industry extracts natural resources for export, to the benefit of corporations—sometimes foreign—and their shareholders, not of rural communities. Co-existing with an intact forest in a subsistence lifestyle was likened to living off the interest of a trust fund, whereas round-log export would spend out the principal on the account.

In Sitka, Charlie Wilbur (Sitka transcript, p 50) argued: "Let's not endanger the fragile, growing economy of Southeast Alaska based on healthcare, commercial fishing, charter fishing, and tourism."

Speakers argued the forest is worth more alive than dead, noting that this commercial fishing-subsistence-tourism-based model relies on intact rainforest systems (presumably protected by the 2001 Roadless Rule), and would sustain their lifestyles and connections to one another and the region. There were differences across

communities in visions of a sustainable, forest-based economy for the region. Tourism (especially cruise-based), second-growth or value-added timber, and commercial fishing were all suggested as paths to future economic sustainability. Additionally, speakers in Angoon and Hydaburg emphasized that an exemption from the 2001 Roadless Rule could drive economic hardship, childhood poverty, nutritional health, and community sustainability concerns more than the potential harm to tourism opportunities. They argued that hunting and fishing tourism competed with local subsistence uses without benefiting the local economy.

Can You Hear Southeast Speaking?

Gail Tharpe-Lucero (Angoon transcript, p 22) described the value of the community way of life and of environmental stewardship, concluding:

> […] proper professional government relationships and relationships with all of the community are critical to maintain this pristine area […]
>
> The government locally I think has some insight to that, but I'm sure that Washington, D.C. is fairly clueless to that. They have an obligation to this community to maintain the ability for this community and the people who live in it to function. And to be able to not only survive but to thrive in this community.

Speakers articulated strong viewpoints on the federal rulemaking process. First, some expressed concern about the lack of respect, responsiveness, and inclusion that tribes were given by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Forest Service. This included comments arguing the Department had not responded to a request for government-to-government consultation in a timely manner. Others were careful to distinguish between local agency staff, in some cases thanking local staff. Second, speakers argued the conclusion of the hearings was foregone. Third, speakers shared concerns that the efforts to amend the 2001 Roadless Rule were just a "final insult" after generations of organizing for conservation and community goals.

Discussion

In this article, we present six themes reflecting community views of how changes to the 2001 Roadless Rule could affect Southeast Alaska, as expressed in the 2019 Federal Roadless Rule subsistence hearings. The testimonies provide insight into the meaning of the forest from the perspective of local people, and their desires to maintain and steward healthy local ecological relationships and communities. Though many testimonies touched on depressed community economies and limited resources, vanishingly few speakers advocated for new timber or construction jobs. What speakers wanted was to reestablish access to land, resources, and to revitalize a way of life with the forest that natural resource regulations and past land use had broken down.

The testimonies detail how land-management choices shape access to harvestable resources, raising the idea that sustainable land, fish, and game management requires attention to habitat management and local community needs. Wild harvests serve as vital buffers against hunger in rural communities and contribute to the self-identity of those communities. As Alaska Department of Fish and Game data show, across rural communities, wild-harvested food systems include use of key resources throughout the year

including salmon, deer, blueberries, and herring eggs, and lower levels of use of a wider, more diverse range of resources, including wild fungi, plants, and marine mammals (Alaska Department of Fish & Game [ADF&G] 2021). For Alaska Native communities, especially, the hearings raise the issues of adaptation, food sovereignty, and self-determination. The testimonies question how management goals for public lands are selected, and how access to these resources is distributed within and outside of the region. Given that so much of local wild harvests are noncommercial, how do management agencies compare the benefits of a roadless forest to one that is partially open to harvest and sale into the global timber and pulp markets? The testimonies raise the question of where local needs and Alaska Native sovereignty fits into federal land management.

This study contributes to a wider literature on the role of community participation in conservation, food sovereignty, and land management planning. Our study lends to the global conversation a glimpse at the social workings and governance limitations of perhaps the most intimately linked social-ecological systems in the US, Alaska subsistence, enmeshed in federal land management rulemaking, local community sustainability, and conservation contexts. Here, where rural perspectives on subsistence impacts are guaranteed hearings for land management uses, community desires for social-ecological coexistence, self-determination, and sustainability ring clear. Providing opportunities for testimony is one of many steps toward enhancing land and food sovereignty. Also important are identifying structural elements, such as regulatory, administrative, and processual barriers that reinforce power differentials while facilitating opportunities for co-management or ceding of habitat resources (Green et al. 2022).

For example, the Forest Service agency-wide guide to understanding ecosystem services contains minimal mention of wild foods or land management for food-systems goals (Kline and Mazzotta 2012), though subsistence priorities are outlined in the 2016 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan per ANILCA (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service [USDA FS] 2016). To respond to these data, land management agencies will need robust institutional capacity and leadership to facilitate partnerships with communities to improve access to and production of noncommercial food and fiber.

A food- and community-based lens may also orient research on climate change adaptation toward meeting basic nutritional and cultural needs. The biophysical and ecological impacts of climate change include as the loss of glaciers and snowfields that feed salmon streams, and more frequent and severe floods and droughts (Bryant 2009; Sergeant et al. 2020; Bellmore et al. 2023). These threats are complex, and transdisciplinary approaches may be needed to support community resilience (Steger et al. 2021).

Traditional and customary stewardship and harvesting practices are essential indigenous lifeways, but barriers to both management and harvests abound (Natcher et al. 2016; Norgaard 2019; Kimmerer and Lake 2001). One promising example is found in indigenous guardian programs, where land and sea management plans and monitoring activities are the responsibility of community-based environmental stewards (Reed et al. 2021). In addition, there have been attempts to reintroduce harvest of traditional foods in U.S. National Parks, such as the subsistence harvest of gull eggs, which restored indigenous sovereignty over resources within a contained fashion and under the discretion of the park superintendent (Hunn et al. 2003).

The hearings bring to light a lack of trust between communities and state and federal officials and with the rulemaking process itself. This resulted in tribal refusal to endow the legitimacy of the rulemaking process (Leighton et al. 2020) and formal comments from the Southeast Alaska Regional Advisory Council (2020). Lack of trust may contribute to broader rural disenfranchisement, widen rural/urban divides, and erode the effectiveness of land-management and community-relations. But speakers provided ideas to build trust among rural communities and federal agencies. These included proactive efforts to sustain rulemaking procedures and government-to-government relations and agency recognition of local and traditional forest uses. They also suggested investment in infrastructure such as cabins and trails that facilitate local community access to the forest for hunting, fishing, and gathering activities in culturally important locations, not just those catered to cruise ship-based or urban visitors. Such an investment would challenge decision-making practices that focus exclusively on the false duality of preservation versus commercial profit.

Conclusion

Our study presents six themes from the testimony from Southeast Alaskan residents in the federal subsistence hearings held during the Roadless Rulemaking Process in 2019. These themes suggest the connections between residents and the forest are essential to their health and wellbeing, Native ways of life, and the future Alaskan peoples envision for forthcoming generations. This rich dataset also offers new avenues for enhanced trust and sustainability that can open conversations among managers, researchers, and communities about sustainable land management. Understanding the perspectives of local people in land management decisions is essential to fully conceptualizing natural resource management.

The case of Tongass rulemaking illustrates how attention to local and Native community knowledge, needs, and aspirations informs democratic and sustainable public land management more generally. Southeast Alaska communities are particularly dependent upon wild resources, and the historical context of the region has led to substantial distrust between rural, Alaska Native, and government entities. These issues are pervasive across American public lands with important implications for rural poverty (West 1994), conflict (Martin et al. 2019; Carr Childers 2015), ecological sustainability (Scasta, Hennig, and Beck 2018), and food sovereignty particularly where local and national goals for land use may be misaligned. New forms of respectful dialogue, engagement, and collaboration, including in the form of research and forest management, are important to trust building and respect. Hearing the views of local and Native communities in public-lands management discussions can frame a richer picture of the implications of these decisions and is an important step in the process of improving access for rural communities and reducing disenfranchisement.

Notes

1. In 2016, following a directive from the Secretary of Agriculture (Memorandum 1044-009, 2013), the Tongass National Forest amended their Land and Resource Management plan to transition harvests away from old-growth forests and towards predominantly second-growth

timber (USDA 2013). In 2016, following a directive from the Secretary of Agriculture (Memorandum 1044-009, 2013), the Tongass National Forest amended their Land and Resource Management plan to transition harvests away from old-growth forests and towards predominantly second-growth timber (USDA 2013).

2. Both Alaska state law (AS 16.05. 940[32]) and federal law (Title VIII of ANILCA, Section 803) define subsistence uses as the "customary and traditional" uses of wild resources for various uses including food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, transportation, handicrafts, sharing, barter, and customary trade.

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