



# Chugach Children's Forest



## Issue

The 5.5 million-acre Chugach National Forest is the second largest national forest in the country, and one of the world's most intact temperate rainforests with only 90 miles of forest roads. It's a vast and inspiring mix of glaciers, watersheds, and wild coastline—and the backyard of half of Alaska's population. This year, the Chugach National Forest will be dedicated as a *children's forest*, a symbolic designation underscored by substantive new programs developed in partnership with Alaska Geographic to address four issues critical to Alaska's future:

- (1) Healthy, active youth, families, and communities;
- (2) Expanded education and career pathways, particularly through science and technology;
- (3) An understanding of climate change, and its human, environmental, and economic impacts;
- (4) Overcoming barriers to stewardship and developing shared volunteer networks.

## Background

People come from all over the world to experience Alaska's backcountry and wilderness, yet children from many Anchorage neighborhoods have never set foot in the forest. Nationally, experts suggest a variety of factors for the sharp decline in the amount of time kids spend outdoors. Some reasons include: parental fears, aggravated by excessive media; single parents, or two working parents leaving little time for unstructured play; or, the lure of "safer" indoor activities like computers and video games. Whatever the reason, as few as 8% of children nationwide regularly spend time playing outdoors. Many of Alaska's children—including increasingly urbanized Alaska Native children—are following a similar path. As a result, an entire generation is missing out on the many physical, emotional, and psychological benefits of exposure to nature, including critical thinking skills, self-confidence, reduced stress, and improved cognitive development.

Studies show that isolation from nature may be a significant contributing factor to a wide range of childhood maladies, including obesity, attention disorders, and depression. Today's generation of "indoor children"—wired an average of six hours a day to television, the internet, video games, and cell phones—is missing the benefits of active outdoor play. Experts ranging from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services to the Kaiser Family Foundation are starting to agree: children may need access to nature the same way they need good nutrition and adequate sleep.

At the same time, Alaska is at the melting edge of climate change. During the last four decades, Alaska has heated more than anywhere else in the country. Average annual temperatures have increased 3–5 degrees Fahrenheit, and winter temperatures have soared 7–10 degrees. Changes are both subtle and severe—environmentally, culturally, and economically. Sea ice is melting. Wildfires are intensifying. Entire villages in western and northern Alaska are facing rapid relocation from traditional lands and lifestyles. Businesses and conservation organizations are forming alliances to encourage innovation and collaboration, but ultimately, it's our children who will bear the consequences and manage the solutions of a warming world.

Through this project, the Chugach National Forest is taking action to help address these broader societal issues. It recognizes the overlap in the challenges Alaska faces, and the fact that community needs cannot be separated into one-dimensional “environmental issues” or “children’s issues.” Instead, solutions must reach across conventional boundaries. To do so, the Chugach National Forest has engaged a diverse range of partners in support of the children’s forest, including Alaska Geographic, National Geographic, National Wildlife Federation, Choose Outdoors, Alaska Teen Media Institute, the Anchorage, Cordova, and Chugach School Districts, the University of Alaska, the Municipality of Anchorage, and the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council.

## Current Situation & Key Organizing Programs

- **Youth-managed section(s) of the forest:** Patterned in part on an existing program in the San Bernardino National Forest, up to 100,000 acres of the Chugach is being designated for youth-assisted management. *Ground surveys and GIS mapping started this spring and summer.*
- **Expedition Series:** During extended expeditions, this program will match 14-17 year old youth with professional mentors, providing students with leadership skills in natural resource management, geosciences, glaciology, and climate change, while providing hands-on, outdoor experiences with their peers from rural and urban Alaska. A component of these expeditions will be producing media to share their experiences and educate the public about pressing issues facing Alaska. The First Annual Children’s Forest Expedition was held in Prince William Sound June 15-22, 2009.
- **Climate change research sites:** Shadowing researchers from the Forest Service and the University of Alaska, students will conduct quantifiable, inquiry-based research to monitor the impacts of climate change on Alaska’s forest and wetland ecosystems. Research sites will incorporate existing networks such as the Copper River International Migratory Bird Initiative (and its *Winging Northward* electronic classroom), GLOBE (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment), and the ALISON project (Alaska Lake Ice and Snow Observation Network). *Program to begin in FY10.*
- **School-Community Partnerships:** Through partnerships with municipal parks, state and federal lands, community organizations, and teacher professional development programs, school partnership programs include class projects that directly address pressing community issues, engage students in local stewardship projects, connect community experts as resources for teachers, and connect rural and urban schools in collaborative projects.

## More Information

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