



Tongass National Forest

The largest temperate rainforest in the world stretches along the Pacific coast from central California north through British Columbia, Canada, and up through the Southeast Alaska panhandle. The Tongass National Forest makes up the northernmost portion of this forest, from the southern tip of Alaska's Prince of Wales Island 500 miles north to the far edge of Malaspina Glacier west of Yakutat Bay. At 17-million acres, the Tongass is the largest forest in the United States' National Forest System, roughly the same size as West Virginia.

A voyager traveling on Alaska's Inside Passage is surrounded by the Tongass National Forest. Few places in the world have the geologic and climatic variations that sculpt this landscape. There are 11,000 miles of shoreline, with regal mountains rising from the tidewater to overlook a mostly undeveloped and isolated landscape. Along the west, the thousands of islands that make up the Alexander Archipelago protect the mainland and small communities from the full fury of the storms moving in from the Gulf of Alaska. To the east, snow and ice, including the 1,500-square-mile Juneau Ice Field located less than eight miles from the salt water in Gastineau Channel.

Water defines practically everything in the Tongass National Forest, and many Southeast Alaska communities depend upon the waters of the Tongass for hydroelectric power.



At higher, frigid elevations, dramatic "rivers of ice" creep along at one to two inches per day. Like tributaries of a river, glaciers flow together, but the ice paths do not mix; each icy stream retains its own pathway, leaving a striped pattern of rock as it grinds down a valley. The Tongass boasts the largest tidewater glacier in the world—Hubbard Glacier near Yakutat, at six miles wide. The forest also has the southernmost tidewater glacier in North America—LeConte Glacier between Wrangell and Petersburg.

On the forest floor nearby, tangles of tree roots grow over rocks and fallen logs forming dark, moist caves. In the canopy above, western hemlocks push their floppy tops up through the mist while Sitka spruce brave the salt-laden winds along the water's edge. Sub-alpine fir, red cedar, yellow-cedar and hardwoods like alder find their own spot in the forest.

Unlike most places in the Lower 48 states, it is wind, and not fire, that disturbs the forest, sometime toppling acres of trees at a time. In areas protected from the wind, old growth trees range from 200-700 years old. About 90 percent of these old growth forests remain as they were 100 years ago. Close to 70 percent of old growth on the Tongass is protected in reserves, and will never be eligible for harvest. Approximately 92 percent of the Tongass is protected from roaded development.

Much of the Tongass National Forest looks as it has for centuries. Development came late to Southeast Alaska and it still hasn't penetrated into many of its remote areas. To assure that wilderness remains an important part of Alaska, including Southeast Alaska, Congress has designated more than one third of the Tongass (5.9 million acres) to be managed as wilderness in perpetuity for all current and future generations of Americans.

The Tongass truly is where the wild things are. The forest is home to moose, wolves, beaver, fox and porcupine. Sitka black-tailed deer and bears forage along the shoreline; mountain goats climb along steep, rocky crags above the timberline. Sea otters swim along the outer coast, making their way to more protected waters. Whales, porpoises and seals also make use of these interior waters for feeding and breeding.

The Tongass National Forest is unique in the national forest system--there are no threatened or endangered species on the forest. In fact, there are more brown bears on one island (Admiralty) within the Tongass than there are in the entire Lower 48 states combined. Large populations of bald eagles also nest on Admiralty Island, and the largest known concentration of bald eagles in North America gather each fall and winter along the Chilkat River near Haines to feast on late runs of salmon. In spring, a run of eulachon fish lures hundreds of eagles to the Stikine River Delta near Wrangell. Thousands of shorebirds stop on this delta to rest from their long trek north to their summer grounds.



In a land so rich with water, fish such as Dolly Varden, rainbow, steelhead, and cutthroat trout find a natural home. All five species of Pacific salmon—chum, coho, king, pink and sockeye—depend upon the streams and waters of the Tongass for spawning and fry-rearing habitat.

The native people who inhabited this forest for thousands of years before the northern Europeans, had no word for starvation—a testimony to the richness of the Tongass and its amazing abundance of fish, wildlife, berries and other land bounty. Each generation of Tlingit and Haida shares its knowledge of the land with the next. The Tsimshian moved from their former home in British Columbia to Annette Island in the late 1800s. Today, Native Alaskans are among the more than 70,000 people who live in Southeast Alaska and depend upon the natural resources from the forest.

Past ways still flourish. Today, many rural residents depend on a subsistence lifestyle, just as Alaska Natives have for centuries. Gold in this era drew thousands of fortune-seekers up through the Inside Passage to Wrangell, Sitka, Douglas, Juneau and Skagway. As the gold potential dwindled in the early 1900s, communities adapted their economies to fishing, timber and tourism.

The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center in Juneau and the Inside Passage are among the top tourist attractions in the state. Visitors travel to the Juneau Ice Field via helicopter and take organized boat trips into Misty Fjords and Tracy Arm Wilderness Areas. A growing number of visitors seek a smaller group experience. Ecotourism is one of the faster growing portions of the tourism industry.

People from all over the world are passionate about the wet and enigmatic Tongass National Forest. The Forest Service manages the Tongass for multiple uses, whether it is for the vast, undisturbed wild places people seek for recreation and inspiration, or for the natural resources others depend upon for their livelihood.

More Information

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