

Podcast
“Nugget Falls Elevated Walkway”
USFS Alaska
TRTL 6:46

NARRATOR: Welcome to Forest Focus, presented by the U.S. Forest Service, Alaska Region...

“If you build it, they will come” is more than just a line lifted from a movie, and in the case of one popular trail in Southeastern Alaska it was “If we build it better, they can get here safely.”

Near Mendenhall Glacier in the Tongass National Forest is a spectacular feature known as Nugget Falls, fed by melting snow and enticing hundreds of annual visitors to traverse a user-created trail along the shore of Mendenhall Lake.

But, as Ed Grossman, Recreation Program Manager for the Juneau Ranger District tells us, the route was not without considerable hazard, prompting rangers to advise against its use:

ED_GROSSMAN_01

“THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE VISITOR CENTER AND THE FALLS IS ABOUT EIGHT-TENTHS OF A MILE. AND AS SUMMER WOULD PROGRESS, OF COURSE OUR WARMER TEMPERATURES WOULD HAVE A 24-HOUR THAW ON THE ICE FIELD AND ON THE SNOW CAPPED MOUNTAINS, AND THE LAKE LEVELS WOULD RISE AND THAT USER-MADE TRAIL WOULD BE FLOODED IN A NUMBER OF AREAS.”

NARRATOR:

But, the attraction proved to be simply irresistible for many, sometimes with painful consequences:

GROSSMAN_02

“ONE WAS VERY CLOSE TO THE VISITOR CENTER, THAT WOULD FORCE PEOPLE UP ONTO A BEDROCK FACE, THAT, WHEN IT WAS WET, WAS QUITE SLIPPERY AND RATHER TREACHEROUS AND THERE WAS A BUNCH OF ALDERS

ALSO THAT MADE NAVIGATION OF THAT SECTION VERY DIFFICULT AND SOMEWHAT DANGEROUS. WE HAD A NUMBER OF INJURIES THERE EVERY YEAR, OVER THE YEARS, MOSTLY ANKLE-RELATED INJURIES FROM SLIPPING ON THAT ROCK FACE OR THRASHING IN THE ALDERS.”

NARRATOR:

Clearly, something had to be done to allow safe access while also protecting sensitive wildlife habitat nearby:

GROSSMAN_03

“ANY TIME YOU HAVE FLOODED AREAS AND PEOPLE WALKING THROUGH THEM, YOU CAN HAVE SILTATION AND EROSION. AND THERE'S ALSO THIS BIRD COLONY THAT THE USER-MADE ROUTE WENT VERY CLOSE TO, AND WE HAD TO CORDON THAT OFF EVERY YEAR TO KEEP PEOPLE FROM WANDERING OUT AMONG THE NESTS.”

NARRATOR:

So began a multi-year effort to design, fund and construct an elevated walkway that would allow safe access to the falls and protect the fragile ecosystem.

Peter Cross with the Juneau Ranger District is the Trail Crew Leader, he says that frozen ground helped facilitate the early stages of construction:

CROSS_01

“THERE WAS ACTUALLY ABOUT A FOOT OF SNOW ACTUALLY STILL ON THE TERRAIN THERE, AND WE WENT IN WITH AN EXCAVATOR AND ACTUALLY PLOWED THE SNOW OFF OF THE CORRIDOR THE TRAIL CORRIDOR THAT WE HAD, THE SEASON BEFORE, DONE SOME BRUSHING ON , AND SO THE SUN HIT IT, AND ABOUT TWO WEEKS LATER WE WERE DOING THE DIRT WORK, GRUBBING IS WHAT IT'S CALLED, AND WE GRUBBED THE TRAIL LINE, AND HIT THE TRAIL RUNNING FROM THERE, IT WENT VERY QUICKLY THAT FIRST SEASON.”

NARRATOR:

Cross tells us there were a few challenges along the way:

CROSS_02

“THERE WERE A NUMBER OF PLACES IN THAT TRAIL CORRIDOR THAT WE CAME UPON SOME ROCK THAT WE ... EVEN WITH ABOUT THE LARGEST EXCAVATOR THAT WE COULD RENT HERE IN JUNEAU THAT WE JUST WEREN'T ABLE TO MOVE. WE ACTUALLY HAD TO DRILL HOLES IN IT AND CUT SLICES IN IT AND BREAK THE ROCK WITH HAMMERS AND SO IT WAS VERY TEDIOUS, SOME OF THE AREAS THAT WE HAD TO BLOCK WERE AS LONG AS EIGHT FEET LONG BY FOUR FEET WIDE, AND THERE'S A SECTION AT THE VERY END OF THE TRAIL WHERE YOU CAN SEE SOME OF THE LARGE ROCKS THAT WE BASICLY JUST CUT THE TOP OFF OF AND THE TRAIL IS, BASICALLY, YOU NOW JUST WALK ACROSS THE TOP OF THE ROCK.”

NARRATOR: Along with Peter Cross, Trails Technician Matt Adams did the majority of the work on the elevated walkway, with occasional help from fire crews and district employees. Adams calls it a memorable experience:

ADAMS_01

“WE CAN, YOU KNOW, REMEMBER EACH STEP OF THE WAY, HOW HARD IT WAS, BEING ABLE TO LOOK BACK AND WALK ACROSS THE STRUCTURE WAS...THE BEST FEELING, BEING ABOVE THE WATER, BECAUSE A LOT OF THE WORK WAS LIKE...FOR THE FIRST TWO MONTHS, KINDA LIKE IN THE MUD AND THE WATER, AND PUMPING OUT WATER EVERY DAY. AND THEN ONCE WE GOT THE STRUCTURE UP OUT OF THE WATER, THAT WAS THE BEST FEELING, BEING ABLE TO WALK ABOVE IT AND YOU KNOW AS THE PROJECT PROGRESSED BEING ABLE TO PUT MORE AND MORE STUFF TOGETHER AND NOW THAT IT'S FINISHED, WE CAN KIND OF LOOK BACK AND FEEL ACCOMPLISHED.”

NARRATOR:

The Nugget Falls Trail was funded through Alaska Trails Initiative Grants administered by the Alaska Division of State Parks, as well as Outfitter Guide fees returned to the

Forest Service.

Ed Grossman says project planners put money back into the local economy, an excellent example of public-private partnership:

GROSSMAN_04

“WE WERE ABLE TO HIRE SOME LOCAL CONTRACT WORK, HEAVY EQUIPMENT AND MOVING MATERIALS AND WE ALSO BOUGHT A LOT OF AGGREGATE AND LUMBER FOR THE VARIOUS BRIDGES AND THE ELEVATED WALKWAY ALONG THE WAY, WE ALSO HAD SEASONAL CREW HELPING ON THIS SO THERE WERE SOME HIRES OF YOUNG FOLKS FOR THE SUMMER TO CHIP ON THE EFFORT AND WE’VE HAD A NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS APPROACH US FOR SERVICE PROJECTS.”

NARRATOR:

The Nugget Falls Elevated Walkway at the Mendenhall Visitor Center in the Tongass National Forest will be dedicated on National Public Lands Day, September 24th.

Among those recognized for their part in this long anticipated project will be Peter Cross and Matt Adams:

CROSS_03:

“MY DAUGHTER, SHE’S EIGHT YEARS OLD, SHE LOVES TO SEE THE THINGS I’VE PARTICIPATED IN BUILDING. SHE’S REALLY PROUD, I THINK OF ME, AND A LOT OF THAT COMES FROM HOW I FEEL ABOUT WHAT IT IS THAT I’M DOING, IT’S SOMETHING THAT IS ALWAYS SHARED WITH HER. I MEAN...YEAH, IT’D BE GREAT THAT MAYBE SOMEDAY IF SHE HAD KIDS AND THEY WANT TO SEE THESE THINGS THAT I PARTICIPATED IN , MY HOPE IS THAT THEY’LL STILL BE THERE, I MEAN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THIS LAST PART OF THE TRAIL, WE’RE THINKING THAT IT’S A HUNDRED YEAR STRUCTURE.”

ADAMS_02

“BEING ABLE TO LOOK BACK AND SEEING STUFF THAT I'VE DONE, YOU KNOW LIKE BUILDING A TRAIL TO THE WATERFALL, YOU KNOW IT'S SOMETHING THAT I'VE ACCOMPLISHED, AND I CAN ALWAYS JUST TAKE MY KIDS OUT THERE AND SAY, YOU KNOW, 'I BUILT THIS TRAIL' AND IT'S SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF. AND ALSO LIKE YOU KNOW, GOING TO WORK EVERY DAY, AND LOOKING AROUND AT THE BEAUTY...HAVING THE GLACIER THERE YOU KNOW, AND REALIZING THAT THIS IS MY OFFICE...THIS IS WHAT I DO.”

MUSIC UP

NARRATOR:

Alaska Forest Focus is produced for the USDA Forest Service Alaska Region Office of Public Affairs and Communications.

In Juneau, I'm Bob Belongie.