

## BOOK REVIEW

**Tongass: Pulp Politics and the Fight for the Alaska Rain Forest.** 2nd edition. 2005. Kathie Durbin. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon. \$19.95, paperback; 344 pages, 36 black-and-white photographs. ISBN 0-97071-056-7.

Given the all too common conditions that currently [2005] exist, namely the non-transparency of politics and governments, much disingenuousness of industries, and the involvement of such entities in undercover dealings, I believe everyone should read this book. However, be forewarned; the prose is very detailed and the reading can be tedious. Kathie Durbin gives a blow-by-blow account of dealings, which began in about 1954, between the USDA Forest Service, Alaskan governmental officials, and the timber industry. According to the background information, the story really starts in 1907 when President Theodore Roosevelt signed the proclamation establishing the Tongass National Forest. That forest, where these dealings took place, is the largest national forest in the United States. Located in the archipelago-like geography of southeast Alaska, it covers some 17.9 million acres. Other than the large block of forest in the Yakutat region (some 160 × 80 miles), the northern end of the contiguous forest begins north of Haines and at the northern end of Chichagof Island and continues to the southern end of Prince of Wales Island, covering roughly some 380 miles north-south and 100 miles east-west. To put those dimensions into perspective, Prince of Wales Island, the largest of the many islands, covers about 2231 miles<sup>2</sup> and has 990 miles of coastline (a bit larger than the state of Delaware with a longer coastline than California).

The Tongass National Forest is homeland to the Tlingit and Haida native Americans. At one time temperate rain forests were found along the western coastal fringes of every continent except Africa and Antarctica. Most have

disappeared because of human usage; however, along with parts of coastal Chile, New Zealand, and Tasmania, the Tongass is among the few remaining global temperate rain forests.

This is the story of attempts by conservationists and others to save important parts of this magnificent landscape from clear-cutting. It is the story of various large wood-pulp companies committing the Forest Service to furnish a specified amount of low-cost timber for harvesting, thereby driving independent competitors out of business while at the same time, in a sense, controlling the Forest Service and local politicians. It didn't help that U.S. Senators Ted Stevens and Frank Murkowski and U.S. Congressman Don Young, all with known tendencies to downplay conservation in the interest of "development" and resource extraction, were at the national political helm of Alaska. Intertwined with all these dealings were the results of the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act, namely, the rise of native corporations and their claim to parcels of land and unfettered use of that land.

Durbin was straightforward in giving names and dates of all the principal characters regardless of their positions or roles within agencies or corporations. The book was obviously well researched. Durbin leaned detectably toward the environmental camp, but her treatment of the issues seemed fair and balanced nonetheless. One oversight, from my perspective, was the lack of discussion of the Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*), an obligate denizen of the old growth forests (as is the Northern Goshawk [*Accipiter gentilis*], which did receive attention), especially because of its increasingly precarious status as those forests disappear.

Herein I've tried to convey a sense of the contents of Durbin's book. Because there were so many players, a more detailed review would not have been overly fruitful. The final chapter, written for this 2nd edition, is entitled

“Five Years After: An Update.” A quote from this chapter is instructive, “The forest has intrinsic value in just being a forest. In some cases, it is not in the best interest of the forest to log’ . . . The Tongass timber sale program has always been heavily subsidized by American taxpayers. By one estimate, the program lost \$750 million between 1982 and 2002. Those subsidies continued after the pulp mills closed in the 1990s, as Ketchikan tried to lure new investors with offers of Tongass timber. Between 1999 and 2003, Senator Ted Stevens

added \$36 million to the Forest Service’s budget to prop up the program.”

I recommend this small book to everyone, even those only interested in the dynamics of politics and not forests or conservation. It is a good read.

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