The Nature Conservancy

Alaska 2020

Letter From Our Director

This summer, during a trip with my family across the Denali Highway, we paused to marvel at the Amphitheatre Mountains. A place of stunning beauty, it has sustained caribou and the people who depend on them for thousands of years. In a time when distance is necessary, I found myself grateful to be in Alaska, which offers space and that unique solace that can only be found in nature.

Alaska's lands and waters have long supported our communities. Now, when we need them more than ever, they face imminent threat. The last great wild salmon nursery in Bristol Bay is at risk of being lost forever to large-scale mining. The ancient old-growth forests of the Tongass face further devastation from new roads creating easier access for logging.

Yet in this era of social distancing, we can still harness the power of community. United, we can preserve these globally important places. We are not the first to hold such deep connections to Alaska's lands. At TNC we are committed to conservation work that is equitable, and that respects the knowledge and values of those who have stewarded this place since time immemorial.

Alaska has much to offer and we have much to give in return. Our successes this year are thanks to your support. We look forward to the future, together, ensuring Alaska remains a place where people and nature will thrive for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Steve Cohn, Alaska State Director

An Alaskan Works for Global Change

Andrea Akall'eq Sanders grew up in the Yup'ik community of Mamterilleq, or Bethel, on the Kuskokwim River in western Alaska. Like most people in this region, she has witnessed changes to the environment due to climate change and the impact it is having on communities. The threat to her family and community's distinct, traditional way of life is what drove her toward a career in conservation.

Andrea is the new Global Director of Conservation in Partnership with Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities at The Nature Conservancy, as well as a member of our Alaska Women's Adaptation Network. This network is made up of women leading climate adaptation efforts in their communities throughout Alaska.

In both roles, she is committed to using her voice to help evolve the definition of what conservation means. "It means elevating the leadership of Indigenous peoples around the world and respecting their worldviews and ways of knowing—and incorporating that knowledge into global conservation work," she says. TNC Alaska is looking forward to following her lead and continuing to evolve our work to further support and elevate Indigenous-led conservation.

Andrea is a Tribal Citizen of the Native Village of Kwinhagak. She also serves as president and co-founder of Native Peoples Action, an Anchorage based non-profit created to provide Alaska Native communities and their traditional values with a voice at all levels of policy making, including environmental justice work.

Our Priorities

Alaska is our last best chance to protect nature and all that it provides for us.

TNC Alaska's plans are bold because they must be. The world faces formidable challenges and Alaska's vast lands and vibrant waters will play a crucial role.

Fish

Preserve Alaska's wild fish strongholds, especially the salmon fishery of Bristol Bay, and advance management decision-making authority by local communities.

Climate

Spur federal climate policy, conserve the most climate-resilient landscapes, and strengthen communities' resilience to climate change through innovative and natural climate solutions.

Landscapes

Ensure conservation of key public lands that balances critical habitat protection, sustainable use of natural resources for economic benefit, and co-management by tribes and local communities.

A Place of Wild Salmon

The Tlingit village of Klawock is a place of wild salmon. It's why people live here, at the mouth of the Klawock River in southeast Alaska. But both elders and young subsistence harvesters have noticed declines in this essential food source over their lifetimes. Historic cannery records show runs of over 70,000 sockeye, but in the past decade some have been as low as 1,500. This trend is alarming, but it's bringing people together.

There is no single cause of the decline, and no single solution. Impacts to the health of the fishery have come from many sources over the years: intense commercial fishing pressure in the 19th century, the construction of a salmon hatchery in the 1970s, and widespread logging and roadbuilding in the 1980s have all played a role.

While there may not be a silver bullet solution in Klawock, they are equipped with the tools for success. The new Klawock Lake Sockeye Salmon Action Plan, produced by TNC and its partners, is the product of years of science and community momentum. It outlines specific, community-supported projects that would contribute to healthy and sustainable sockeye populations.

This work isn't just about protecting fish, it's about securing a renewable food source that has sustained Indigenous people in Klawock for thousands of years. With continued Indigenous stewardship and collaborative action, Klawock's new action plan will help resilient communities thrive into the future.

Bristol Bay

Important and Imperiled

The sockeye salmon pushes its way up a surging stream, its candy apple red body dodging fishermen's nets, bears and eagles, gliding past tundra exploding with lichens and wildflowers, and passing beneath overhanging alder and willow. When it finally reaches the spawning grounds in the upper Bristol Bay watershed, the lifecycle will begin again, eventually bringing more than 50 million salmon back to these streams, nourishing plants and animals, and feeding Alaskans and the world.

Bristol Bay faces an imminent threat. Pebble Mine—a huge open-pit copper, gold and molybdenum mine proposed for the heart of Bristol Bay's pristine salmon spawning habitat—has the potential to ravage the world's last great sockeye salmon run, devastating the world's most valuable salmon fishery and harming thousands of Indigenous people that have relied on salmon for their culture, livelihoods and well-being for millennia.

If built, Pebble would be one of the largest mines in the world. Development would require filling in thousands of acres of wetlands and dozens of miles of salmon streams. Billions of tons of toxic rock and chemical waste would need to be stored and maintained forever. In this seismically active area, a dam failure could send toxic sludge through the watershed all the way to the bay, impacting more than 200 miles of salmon habitat.

For twenty years, we've invested heavily in efforts to inform responsible development in Bristol Bay. Our science has shown that mining and this natural treasure cannot co-exist; science that contributed to the Environmental Protection Agency's 2014 decision to halt Pebble Mine due to its projected impact on salmon habitat and water flow. In 2019 the EPA reversed course, and in July 2020 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cleared the way for permitting of Pebble.

We must stop the Pebble Mine. But that is not enough. We must also prevent future large-scale mining in the watershed. We plan to do that by continuing to support residents in achieving their vision for a sustainable future: by ensuring Indigenous communities have increased capacity to shape decision-making processes and increased authority to manage lands and waters sustainably, and by fostering sustainable economic development opportunities in the region, including an increase in locally-owned commercial fishing permits, leadership capacity and small businesses.

We need to act fast. The next 6 months may be our last, best chance to save Bristol Bay salmon.

Bristol Bay produces 6% of all U.S. seafood exports and **50% of the planet's wild sockeye** salmon, feeding Alaskans and the world.

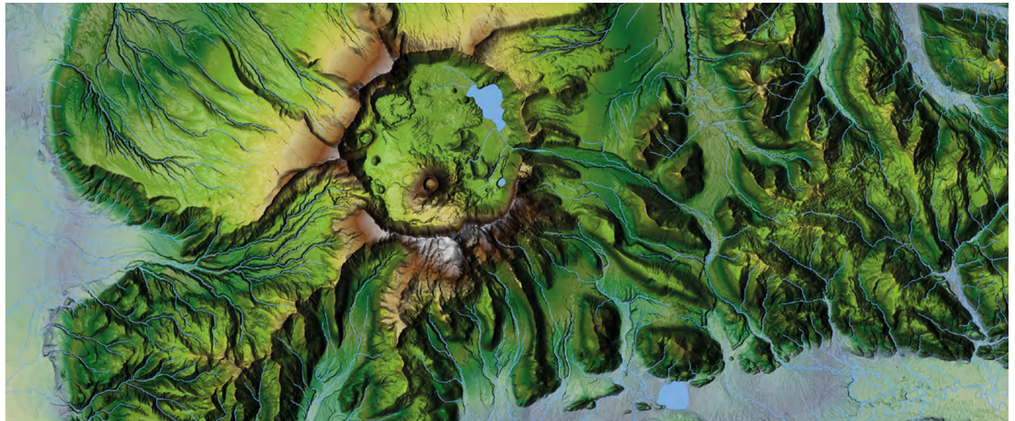
For more than 130 years, Bristol Bay's **$1.5 billion commercial fishing industry** has harvested salmon sustainably, relying on healthy lands and waters for its survival.

The region is home to **31 sovereign tribes,** representing the Yup'ik, Dena'ina, and Alutiiq peoples, whose cultures and livelihoods are linked inextricably to salmon.

"It is evident now, more than ever, that the headwaters of Bristol Bay—**home of the planet's most productive rivers for wild salmon**—cannot also accommodate the environmental damage caused by the proposed Pebble Mine."

—Steve Cohn, State Director, TNC Alaska

Climate



Fire and Ice: Mapping Alaska's Future

Around the world, climate change is altering the very lands and waters we rely on for survival. Alaska is warming twice as fast as the rest of the United States, threatening Alaska's amazing biodiversity and accelerating climate changes that disproportionately impact the lives of Alaska Native people.

To ensure that nature—and people—continue to thrive, we need to find a way to ensure that life continues to flourish. To do that, a team of Nature Conservancy scientists is working with TNC Alaska's scientists to map the 49th state in order to identify areas that are resilient to climate change, and those that are vulnerable.

"The scale is so huge and the topography is so wild; to go from the meandering rivers of the Arctic plain to the volcanos along the Aleutian chain to the rainforest and coastal glaciers, Alaska is testing the mapping team more than any other state they have completed," says Colin Shanley, southeast Alaska conservation planner. "The state faces a host of climate change challenges, many that we had not encountered before. We are having to design new analyses and the conservation challenges are larger than I expected," says Mark Anderson, the director of conservation science for TNC's Eastern U.S. Region.

By mapping Alaska's climate resilient landscapes, we can create a framework to talk to communities and leaders about how to adapt. "That will give us the best chance at ensuring Alaska continues to produce the rich variety of life that makes it so special," says Colin.

"Alaska has an incredibly diverse landscape, all of which seems to be unfragmented and teeming with life. **It is inspiring, even from a distance."**

—Mark Anderson, Director of Conservation Science, TNC, Eastern U.S. Region

The Last Stands for Climate

Our planet's climate is changing and Alaska is disproportionately affected, with major consequences for nature and people. Tackling climate change requires a broad suite of solutions, and nature is a key element. Natural Climate Solutions (NCS) are conservation, restoration and improved land management actions that increase carbon storage or avoid greenhouse gas emissions.

TNC scientists estimate that NCS could account for over a third of the carbon emissions reductions required by 2030 to keep global temperature increases below 2°C. The temperate rainforest in southeast Alaska contains a vast amount of carbon and has a major role to play, partly because it does not frequently burn like national forests in the contiguous U.S. Proper protection and management strategies can help ensure that carbon remains locked up in the trees and soil, and that the forests can continue to absorb greenhouse gases from our atmosphere.

"The Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska is the largest in the country and **stores the greatest amount of carbon of any national forest.** Our conservation work here—fish and wildlife habitat restoration, supporting resilient communities, and transitioning away from old-growth logging—has important implications for climate in the U.S. and beyond."

—Julia Nave, Conservation Forester, TNC Alaska

Alaska's temperate coastal forests absorb anywhere from **3.4 to 7.8 million tons of carbon** per year, enough to offset emissions for up to 6 million vehicles.

The Tongass contains roughly **5 times more carbon** than any other national forest in the country.

The amount of carbon stored in the Tongass is over **3 times** that emitted by the U.S. annually from burning gasoline for transportation.

Landscapes

Aan Latíni

In southeast Alaska, amongst ancient trees and winding waterways, exist vibrant communities that have lived off the land for centuries. At TNC we recognize that an enduring relationship exists between southeast Alaska's first people and their traditional territories, and that conservation and the establishment of public lands have a history of overlooking the knowledge and interests of the people who inhabit the places we seek to protect.

We aspire to change this. For over a decade we have worked with Alaska Native villages, tribes, and corporations through the Sustainable Southeast Partnership to advance sustainable economic development, environmental stewardship and co-management conservation goals. Projects include community forest partnerships as well as training in natural resource management skills. This year we launched an initiative to expand these efforts and ensure funding for the future. This work focuses on increasing Indigenous Guardians stewardship, establishing healing programs and continuing sustainable economic development programs.

The Tlingit word for guardians is "aan latíni," meaning watcher of the land. Indigenous Guardians programs enable greater authority and co-management of natural resources by Alaska Native communities and incorporate Alaska Native ecological knowledge and ways of living to meet conservation outcomes. Part of a growing global movement, this initiative is modeled on successful TNC programs in British Columbia.

Community development specialist, Crystal Nelson (pictured right), explains that investing in partnerships and efforts to advance Indigenous sovereignty and rights to their traditional lands will have a region-wide impact. "If we work toward co-management and better stewardship by supporting Indigenous people to lead, it will benefit all of us and all of the lands."

The Value of Peatlands

On the northern shore of Kachemak Bay, about 8 miles east of the Homer spit, lies Stone Step Lake Preserve. Set amid a birch forest, replete with loons, swans and moose, the preserve sits atop peatlands, which are not only important to the region's juvenile salmon but also absorb and store significant amounts of carbon. In Alaska's Kenai Lowlands, peatlands exist in the remnants of glacial drainageways and lakebeds, and in headwater fens and kettles. They make up about 22 percent of the landscape.

The preserve, a 300-acre plot of undisturbed wetlands and wildlife came under the protection of The Nature Conservancy in 2006 as part of our landscape-scale coastal forest conservation strategy, which has protected over 25,000 acres on Kachemak Bay. Today, it offers a new opportunity. With a grant from the Smithsonian, the Kachemak Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (KBNERR) is conducting peatland carbon research to create a voluntary peatland carbon market in Alaska. KBNERR will set up a field research site on the preserve, using high resolution drone imagery and peat augers to model the volume of peat that is in the ground.

"The Nature Conservancy is pleased to be able to help further KBNERR's research in the Kenai Lowlands. By understanding the vast carbon stores in this area, they can value and market the conservation of these critical peatlands," says Jim DePasquale, spatial ecologist for TNC Alaska. The potential of an economic gain from keeping resources intact illustrates that it is possible to have both a healthy landscape and financial benefit.

A New Economy

People, **Planet** and Profits

Alaska is one of the nation's last, best opportunities to create a thriving conservation economy. Its abundant resources create jobs and support local economies. In southeast Alaska, where the forest is ripe with plump berries, spruce and alder, medicinal plants and salmon, the region's future lies in its rich natural bounty.

"For so long, the narrative in southeast has been that resource development is what supports the economy. We're changing that narrative, because we can attain a better economy through sustainable—rather than extractive—use of resources," says Steve Cohn, state director for TNC Alaska.

It's here that we launched Path to Prosperity Sustainable Business Competition (P2P) in 2013 with partner Spruce Root, a certified Native Community Development Financial Institution. One of our most successful ventures to date, P2P fosters the development of businesses that focus on people, planet and profits. This year, as P2P expands into Bristol Bay and we prepare to transition the P2P program entirely to our partner, we contracted an evaluation of P2P, which revealed the breadth of its success.

The training, business plan development and networking provided by P2P has strengthened a new, green industry with thriving businesses that support sustainable resource use; businesses that forge lumber and custom skis from locally sourced wood, distill spirits using local herbs and seasonings, and create sweets using locally harvested foods.

When Barnacle Foods entered P2P in 2016, owners Lia Heifetz and Matt Kern were just beginning to sell their bull kelp salsa at local markets. Matt explains, "We came into Barnacle with the goal of trying to do good in the region and state. P2P helped cement our community, social and environmental impacts and values right into our operations." The ingredients for Barnacle's salsas and jellies—kelp, blueberries, spruce tips and rhubarb—are provided by about a dozen fishermen, farms and harvesters. "In the long term we hope these harvesters can have a substantial income and we can help diversify rural economies throughout the region," says Matt. Today, Barnacle distributes their goods throughout Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. Their most recent product, a hot sauce made from bull kelp, has been picked up by a national retailer.

"We're proud to look back at the work that we've done to pave the way for a new economy, one that relies on the health of the forest itself to provide for resilient communities," says Crystal Nelson, community development specialist for TNC Alaska. This work, combined with restoration and policy endeavors is intended to preserve Alaska's most critical habitat.

270 entrepreneurs applied to P2P

24 southeast Alaska communities participated

85 finalists received training and resources

15 winners received financial awards

300 + jobs in southeast Alaska supported by the finalists

A **Legacy** of Generosity

Have you ever known a person who can infuse unique, rich flavors into a meal by crafting it with loving hands using food provided by the land? Savory salmon pulled from the river? Crisp vegetables grown from seedlings? Rosemary Kimball was such a person. Rosemary—a TNC Alaska Legacy Club member—passed away in December 2019, leaving an Alaska-sized legacy in spirit and generosity.

A TNC supporter since our chapter's founding over 30 years ago, Rosemary was an Alaskan resident for much longer, arriving in the state in 1976 with her husband, Phillip. They settled first on Fire Island, a small patch of forested land near the head of Cook Inlet, before it was dotted with wind turbines. A few years later they built a home on 40 acres in Sterling that grew to 100 acres over time. Committed to living sustainably off the land, Rosemary was a master gardener and raised most of their vegetables.

Rosemary's connection to the land extended beyond her garden. She loved to explore Alaska's wild places, camping and meeting new people. And she loved to share Alaska with others; a steady stream of visitors could be found passing through her home each summer. Her passion for Alaska's landscapes, its wildlife and its residents, drew Rosemary to TNC. Known for her big heart, Rosemary was generous to her community and conservation, but never sought acknowledgement. It seems only right to recognize her amazing legacy now, as her love of Alaska will continue to inspire our efforts to protect and preserve the places she cared for so deeply.

Alaska's Legacy Club is over 200 members strong. Its members ensure the future of conservation in Alaska by designating TNC as a beneficiary of their estate plans.

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Our vision is a world where the diversity of life thrives, and people act to conserve nature for its own sake and its ability to fulfill our needs and enrich our lives.

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