



Home to bears, eagles, salmon and breath-taking views, the Tongass National Forest — the largest national forest in the United States — covers most of Southeast Alaska, surrounding the famous Inside Passage.

IMAGES PROVIDED BY TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

Unlikely Advocates

One family’s bid to sustainably log
Alaska’s Tongass National Forest

BY SHELLEY SEALE

The dark, cold water laps quietly against the shore of vibrant grass dotted with thick stands of spruce trees. Snow-capped mountains and majestic glaciers peek up from the rolling mist that envelops the land. A fat black bear ambles lazily out of the forest to survey the surroundings as dozens of bald eagles soar overhead.

This is the Tongass National Forest — the largest national forest in the United States — and it covers most of Southeast Alaska surrounding the Inside Passage.

Spread over roughly 17 million acres, the Tongass contains some of the most intact temperate rainforest land in the world, safeguarding a habitat for black and brown bears, deer, moose, humpback and orca whales, sea otters, sea lions and all five species of Pacific salmon. Indigenous Alaska Native peoples still live off the Tongass, named after a Tlingit tribe. Its 800-year-old trees stand as sentry over this Alaskan landscape that is one of the last truly wild places on Earth.

And if Gordon Chew has his way, the Tongass will remain so. Decades of clear-cut logging have threatened the old growth forest; and although Chew is a logger himself, he practices a much different



VISIT THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

As with many of Alaska’s wild places, access by boat allows visitors to see places unreachable by land. UnCruise Adventures (uncruise.com) offers several itineraries that explore the Inside Passage. The UnCruise ships are small and offer highly experienced guides. Individuals can also see Tongass National Forest (www.fs.usda.gov/tongass) by land, where they can hike, fish, bicycle, camp or take a dog-sled ride on a glacier. Permits are needed for some activities, and cabins are available for rent.

model — selective logging. His business, the Tenakee Logging Company, is small. Chew’s son, Sterling, is his business partner, and does logging, milling and general maintenance as well as acting as roads-contract foreman. Daughter Meryl does barge building as well as lumber mill and logging support, while wife Anne Connelly manages the business and finances.

The family works as a federal contractor and hires no subcontractors; though they occasionally bring on people to help harvest and mill, Chew says. Together, they run a sustainable logging operation that benefits the forest.

The family moved to Alaska from the Bay Area of California in 1999 after falling in love with the state on a summer trip four years earlier. A carpenter by trade, Chew couldn’t find the quality of wood he wanted, or sourced how he wanted it, in the area. His solution was to simply source the lumber himself, and he bought his first lumber mill in 2002.

He began bidding with the U.S. Forest Service for small stands of trees to harvest, about 100 trees each — mostly Sitka spruce, western hemlock and Alaska yellow cedar. When Tenakee wins a bid, the company selectively identifies and cuts only »

one-third of the trees in that stand. Chew says this yields between 50 to 100 large spruces or hemlocks or 300 to 400 smaller cedar trees, or a mix of all three species.

This process gives two-thirds of the remaining trees more light, he says. “The brush jumps up; the deer move in; the berries get big. I can tell you from my experience, it doesn’t hurt the forest; it actually can improve the forest,” he says. “And what happens in the future of these old-growth trees is they’ll be bigger with more trees, so you can do this again in 30 years or 50 years. The sustainable part is that there’s still a viable forest left. It’s not taken down — there’s habitat for animals. It’s still beautiful.”

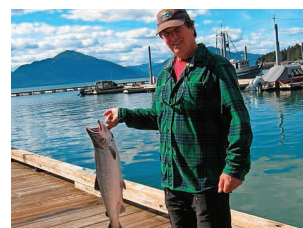
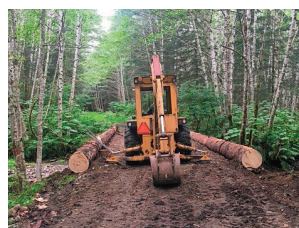
Though Chew makes his living from logging, he affirms that he is also an environmentalist.

“With the knowledge that over one-third of the Tongass National Forest has already been clear-cut, we believe it is long past time to stop this environmentally destructive practice,” he says. “It’s an unusual stance maybe for a logger to take — but I’m not your traditional logger.”

Tenakee sells its timber to home and boat builders, cabinet and furniture makers, and a variety of artisans in Alaska such as Mount Juneau Trading Post, which crafts native paddles and masks from the wood. Most of the wood is sold locally, but some makes it out of the state; a recently



Sterling Chew, son of Gordon Chew, monitors lumber at one of the Tenakee Logging Company's mills. Gordon and his family are committed to sustainably logging the Tongass National Forest. Gordon, bottom right, his wife, Anne Connelly, bottom left, daughter Meryl, not pictured, and Sterling work with the Forest Service to selectively log.



The Tongass' 800-year-old trees stand as sentry over one of the last truly wild places.

excavated, large burl was sold to Dan Selchow of Journey of Life Flutes in Oklahoma to be made into hand-crafted flutes. The company also sells Alaskan yellow cedar grilling planks.

Chew adds that nothing is wasted: Outside slabs are cut for firewood, and any sawdust is set aside for use in a planned solar wood-drying kiln.

The Chews not only bid for logging stands from the federal government, they also perform bridge and road repair for the Forest Service. “We are the only local, working stewards on our

logging road system,” he says. “We are the eyes of the Forest Service and can identify road, culvert, bridge and stream issues before they become bigger problems.”

Chew says the work is extremely rewarding. Being self-sufficient and self-determined, working with the Forest Service and local environmental groups and having a waterfront lifestyle of such stunning beauty make any difficulty worthwhile.

“Here in the Tongass National Forest, we are gifted to live in one of the world’s greatest carbon sinks,” he says. “Our old-growth trees sequester amazing amounts of carbon in the soil, and while many have put a monetary value on that, I am just happy to be here and be a responsible user of our forest resources.” ●