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Letter from Gustavus

A New Raid on the Tongass

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AS WE MOVE TOWARD THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY'S 8th Conference—with the topic "Sustainable Society and Protected Areas"—I choose a vignette from Alaska to show how far we are ffrom making that topic the equation that it must one day become. Which is to say, protected areas will survive only if society survives—i.e., becomes sustainable. The connective "and" becomes an equal sign. And *all* areas, to one degree or another, are protected areas.

From another context, I remember the words of early scientists accompanying explorations into what became the Southwestern United States. Upon entering that arid, rugged, exposed region—so different from the wet and worn and forest-covered lands back East—the scientists uniformly explained that Nature there was like an open book, its rough-cut pages displayed for examination.

By analogy, modern Alaska is our open book for the study of exploitative political economy. Here is displayed a nearly naked boomerism that went out of style decades ago in more gentrified sections of the country. True, the alliance of money and politics is more sophisticated now than in earlier days, but Alaska's frontier mythos still rather admires the big stride of the robber barons. The shrugging off of niceties is perceived as a statement of independence from Washington, from the cloying requirements of environmentalism.

But behind that anachronistic mythos and the simple Main Street-boomer sentiments of the front men lurk industrial-scale devastations. The people who orchestrate these Alaskan melodramas are serious. They are after big stakes. Any they will use any plausible rationale—jobs for the working man, benefits to the Natives, you name it—to cover their sole object, which is to turn cheap, unfinished raw materials into big bucks for their home corporations Down Below or overseas. Alaskans have a penchant, even as they pop their buttons with declarations of independence, for perpetuating their boom-and-bust history as an economic colony.

Let's look at the current flap in the Tongass National Forest to illustrate all of the above. In 1990, to rectify a system of politically dictated timber quotas that was devastating the largest of our National Forests in a frenzy of taxpayer-subsidized clearcutting, Congress passed the Tongass Timber Reform Act. The vote was 99-0 in the Senate, 356-60 in the House. Now, to resurrect the substance of that old system by thinly veiled subterfuge, Alaska Senator Frank Murkowski prepares to re-introduce the Landless Native Land Allocation Act of 1994. In brief, this bill would create five new Native corporations in Southeast Alaska communities that did not qualify for land allocations under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

The bill would give these new corporations the right to select an aggregate of about 645,000 acres from Tongass National Forest—more total acreage, and three to seven times more acreage per new corporation, than was granted to the thirteen Tongass-area Native corporations established by the 1971 act. (Note that this inequity would spawn a host of remedial land claims by the old corporations, thus setting off a chain-reaction raid on the Tongass.) Moreover, these new-corporation land selections would be limited to

parts of the Tongass now off-limits to logging, including roadless areas "permanently" set aside by Congress in the Reform Act of 1990 for their habitat, subsistence, and fishing and hunting values. And further, these new private timberlands would be exempt from sustained-yield requirements. And the final clincher, the timber from these new selections would have to be sold to the Ketchikan Pulp Company or another Alaska mill.

Other signs of the unmitigated nature of this logging bill include:

- The right of new corporations to select lands from one end to the other of the Tongass—without regard to traditional use histories, their own or others'. This provision, too, would ignite conflict between the Native groups, a classic divide-and-conquer ploy of colonial regimes.
- Guaranteed road access to the new selections, even across designated wilderness areas, with all such roads exempt from public review under the National Environmental Policy Act.

In sum, this naked raid, this model of robber-baron mentality and action, would go far toward rendering the Tongass National Forest and bodering seas a single-use system of timber mining. The broader constituency of interests in the Southeast Alaska region would be unceremoniously dumped if this bill were enacted: fisheries, subsistence, tourism, local wood-products industries, as well as *sustainable* logging. The national patrimony—natural resources, biodiversity, scenery—would be irrevocably damaged.

The putative beneficiaries, the landless Native people, would be mercilessly manipulated. They would become the logging agents for the mills, thus destroying their own land base, clearcutting their children's heritage—leaving wastelands, fouled streams, and sterile seas. This process would effectively destroy the subsistence base of their traditional cultures. Despite profound economic needs, many Native people are appalled by this bill, which is a logging bill, not a valid approach to Native land claims.

Senator Murkowski's bill, S. 2539, turns reasonable harvest and sustainability upside down and inside out. Nor is it unique. These kinds of assaults—better camouflaged in gentler regions—go on apace across the country and around the world, fueled by amoral and insatiable multinational corporations whose loyalty stops at the bottom line.

The places and the people next in the cross-hairs of these enveloping forces must stand and say "No," must view their *sustaining* lands as protected areas. In this struggle, preserved lands can serve as symbols, lines in the sand. But the principle of sustainability—sensible harvest—must roll back destruction and embrace the world for *any* lands and seas to be protected.