The Hoonah Community Forest Project

Community-based Resilient Landscape Design

A report by the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council (SEACC)

Bob Christensen (SEAWEAD) and Erika Bjorum (SEACC)

May - 2008

Table of Contents

SUMMARY	. 1
NTRODUCTION WHY WE STARTED THIS PROJECT WHAT IS A COMMUNITY USE AREA? CUSTOMARY AND TRADITIONAL USES. THE IDEA OF RESILIENCE	2 2 2 2
RECIPE FOR RESILIENCE	. 4
SALMON PRODUCTIVITY DEER PRODUCTIVITY CONNECTIVITY TIMBER AVAILABILITY	4 5 6 7
GROUND-TRUTHING	. 9
RESTORATION	. 11
WHAT IS RESTORATION? RESTORATION TOOLS SITE SELECTION EXAMPLE PROJECT: KENNEL CREEK	II II I4 I5
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER	.17
FISH AND WILDLIFE PRIORITY TIMBER OPPORTUNITY WILDERNESS OPPORTUNITY	. 17 . 17 . 17
WHAT NEXT ?	18

List of Figures

Figure 1) Traditional territory of the Hoonah people	.2
Figure 2) Current land ownership and road systems of the Hoonah Community Forest	.2
Figure 3) 1960s pre-logging forest condition	3
Figure 4) Existing forest condition	3
Figure 5) Salmon Habitat Values	4
Figure 6) Existing deer winter habitat (after logging)	5
Figure 7) "Original" deer winter habitat (before logging)	5
Figure 8) Landscape Connectivity	6
Figure 9) Elevational Connectivity	6
Figure 10) Important connectivity corridors	6
Figure 11) Productive old-growth by hcf land classification	8
Figure 12) High priority restoration site 1	4
Figure 13) Kennel Creek upland restoration designs 1	5
Figure 14) Salmon restoration needs in Kennel Creek 1	6

SUMMARY

The Hoonah Community Forest Project evolved out of a series of community meetings about the future of the forest which included everyone from customary and traditional users to employees of the local timber mill. People recognized that the biggest and best trees around Hoonah had been logged, and wanted future logging to have a much smaller "foot print" than that of the past. People also wanted the mill to continue to operate.

SEACC partnered with naturalists Bob Christensen and Richard Carstensen to provide tools and recommendations for the management of the Tongass National Forest and Native Corporation lands immediately accessible to the community of Hoonah, Alaska i.e. "The Hoonah Community Forest". Our task:

- Identify areas where restoration of fish and wildlife habitat would have the greatest impact for community use and ecological value;
- Identify places for logging that would have the least impact on important fish and wildlife; and,
- Utilize the concept of a Community Use Area to develop a landscape design that incorporates the community uses and needs.

Existing data, information gathered during ground-truthing field visits and interviews with Hoonah resi-

dents were used to produce a management guide map (below) that includes three general land use designations: Fish and Wildlife Priority, Timber Opportunity and Wilderness Opportunity. This report describes how this map was created and provides examples for its use.

Key Findings

- Many people in the community of Hoonah are concerned that salmon and deer are becoming less available for cultural and traditional uses.
- Restoration of key salmon and deer habitat would likely increase wildlife populations and overall landscape resilience, as well as provide an opportunity for innovative collaboration among community members, conservation groups, private land owners, federal agencies, contractors and heavy equipment operators.
- Salmon streams identified as having high community value that would benefit from restoration work include: Spasski River, Kennel Creek and possibly also Humpback Creek.
- Traditional deer overwintering strongholds in which restoration work could improve local hunter success include: an area across from town called "The Ranch," Hoonah area, Spasski Valley, Game Creek and Eight Fathom.



Fish and Wildlife Priority The emphasis in these areas would be restoration and maintenance of productive fish and wildlife habitat. Balancing young growth management with restoration and scaling logging to have no additional impacts on habitat connectivity are recommended.

Timber Opportunity

These areas tend to have lower fish and wildlife values, especially in terms of salmon and deer productivity. We recommend that old growth logging be concentrated in these areas.

Wilderness Opportunity

High biological productivity and relatively low road density makes this area an excellent candidate for new congressional protections.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

TIMBER OPPORTUNITY

What sets this approach apart from what is currently being used to manage the lands of the HCF is primarily its emphasis on widely-distributed and *productive* fish and wildlife populations. The current Tongass Land Management Plan, for example, manages the landscape to insure *viable* populations and does not account for community use. We do not believe that the TLMP conservation strategy is well suited to meet the needs of communities that rely on fish and wildlife populations for cultural and traditional uses or economic vitality.

FISH AND WILDLIFE PRIORITY

The backbone of our strategy is the fish and wildlife priority zones - hotspots of salmon and deer productivity stitched together with connectivity corridors. Because extensive logging has already taken place in these areas we recommend that the management emphasis be restoration of sites with high potential productivity and maintenance of remaining patches of productive habitat. Ideally this would involve balancing young growth management with restoration of winter deer habitat, restoration of high priority salmon streams impacted by past logging activities and scaling old-growth logging to have minimal additional impacts on habitat connectivity and deer winter habitat. Areas that fall outside of the fish and wildlife priority zones were identified as timber opportunity zones. Existing data suggest that these areas are relatively less important to fish and deer productivity in the HCF. However, given the extent of past logging, particularly on private lands, some of these areas may not be suitable for intensive old-growth logging. Examples that stand out are Flynn Cove and the coast between Spasski and Whitestone harbor. According to local hunters, these areas still function as deer overwintering strongholds and they are readily accessible from Hoonah.

WILDERNESS OPPORTUNITY

The especially productive watershed of Neka Bay has relatively low road density and is publicly owned so it was identified as the most suitable Wilderness opportunity (green) in the HCF. If designated a Wilderness, Neka Bay could be marketed as a recreation destination and bring a more diversified tourist economy to Hoonah. We make no *specific* recommendation between managing Neka Bay as a Wilderness or fish and wildlife priority zone but would like to note here that it is well suited for some kind of Congressionally designated protection if the community desires such status.



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WHAT NEXT?

There is a story we heard after we started this project about elders from Hoonah describing places in Glacier Bay for anthropologist Tom Thornton. It was awkward for the elders to relate to the flat, overhead perspective of the map they were shown. The map didn't seem to fit. But when they got into a boat and started heading across Icy Strait for Glacier Bay, the place names started to flow. The stories and history emerged. The elders knew that landscape from the closeness of their own lives and the woven threads of generations of ancestors. A map can only tell us so much. It does not flow and grow, live and breathe, or rise and fall. It has no depth, no resilience, no history, no seasons.

But it is a tool to communicate to decision-makers, landowners, management agencies, and members of the larger community how the landscape could quickly bounce back. Through collaboration, stakeholders can work in partnership to begin taking steps now that will bolster the resilience of the community and the landscape. There is no shortage of opportunities for working together: identifying funding for restoration, creating a local watershed council, creative problem-solving around fuel and transportation issues, forest conservation certification for the local mills, developing markets for smaller diameter hemlock forest, integrating restoration with timber sales, and more.

This summer, we plan to visit the Kennel Creek area for an on-the-ground assessment of how effective the upland habitat restoration work there has been, and to explore opportunities for collaborative restoration in the salmon stream. Identifying potential areas for restoration is only the first step: monitoring the effectiveness of this work is critical for understanding what works best for deer and the people who rely on them. Restoration is highly experimental at this point, but it is an experiment that we can't afford not to try.

