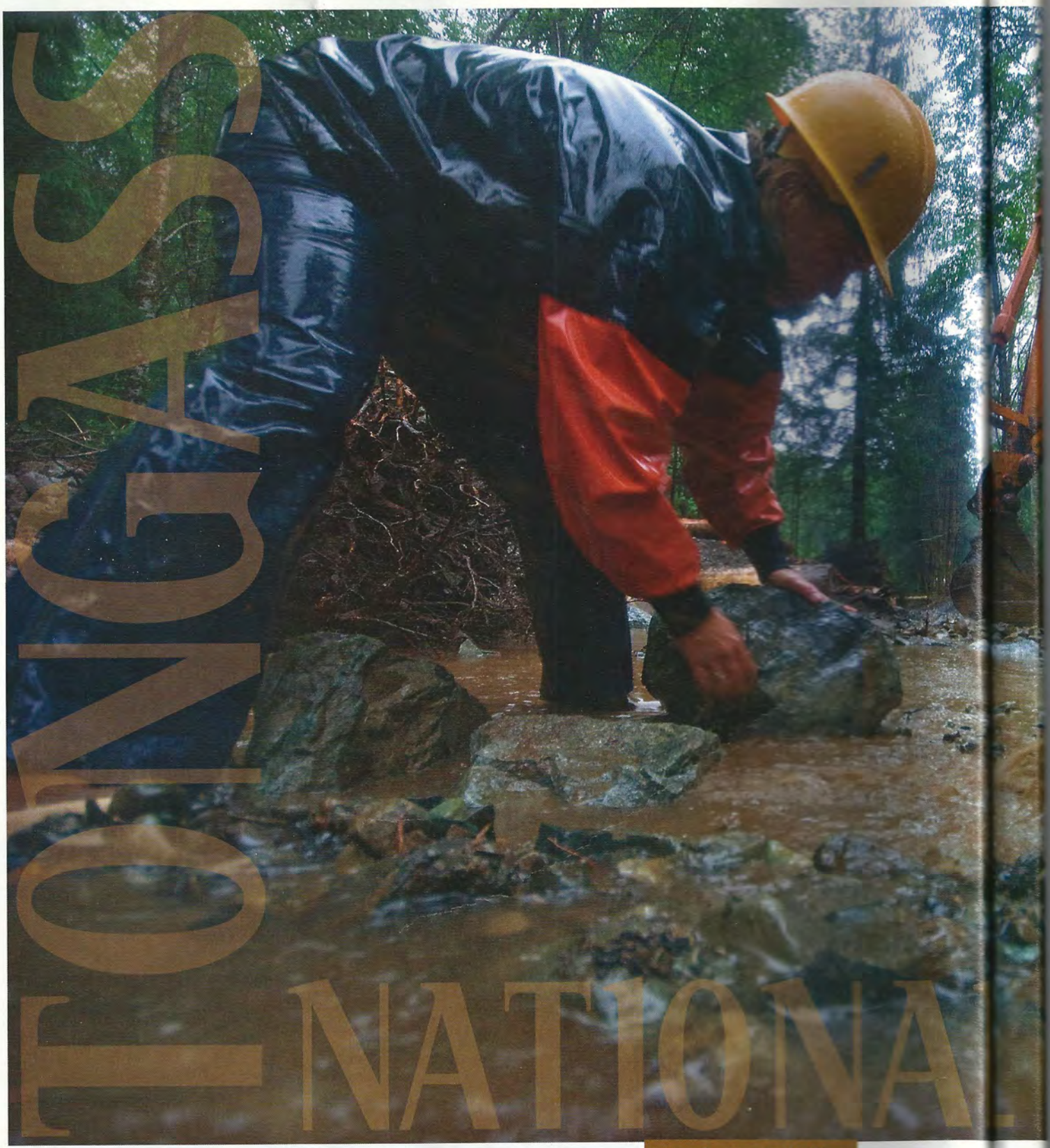


story by Paula Dobbyn

In the Tongass National Forest, Focus Shifts from Logging to Restoration

It has taken a large amount of resources and effort to restore the Harris and it's well worth it. © Bridget Besaw, courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

On a rare sunny day in southeast Alaska last summer, Sheila Jacobson, a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, led a group of visitors on a tour of a battered but recovering salmon watershed in the Tongass National Forest, a 17-million acre coastal temperate rain forest. It's a place that the Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy have invested considerable money, time and effort in, trying to restore it to its near-natural condition.

"This is a relic of the past," said Jacobson, gesturing at a slice of the Harris River floodplain on Prince of Wales Island, about 45 miles west of Ketchikan. "We don't do things like this anymore."

Instead of a stand of old-growth trees buffering the river, a sea of giant stumps sprouted from the mossy soil, looking like the amputated limbs of a wounded soldier. Jacobson, who is stationed on the Craig Ranger District on Prince of Wales, was demonstrating to the group the type of logging that once took place in the Tongass, a world-class sport-fishing destination and the scene of intense conflict in years past between environmental groups and timber-industry supporters. While displaying errors from the past along the Harris River, Jacobson also pointed out signs of forest restoration, including large logs placed in the river to bioengineer the type of spawning and rearing environment that fish favor.

"We're improving fish habitat conditions that are so important," said Jacobson. "It's about jobs. It's about sustaining local economies."

Now that logging has scaled back and the Tongass timber battles have largely faded, sport fishing, ocean products and tourism are industries on the rise in this remote, mostly roadless corner of America. In response to changing economic times and because of the ecological needs of fish-bearing streams, Jacobson's agency is focusing heavily on restoring logged watersheds in places like Prince of Wales and other islands such as north Baranof, Chichagof, Kuiu and Revilla. The goal is to give these ailing watersheds the first aid they need so that fish populations can

return to their natural capacity.

Since sport fishing alone contributes more than $200 million annually to the regional economy, it's an approach to land management that seems to make sense. The Tongass has roughly 17,000 miles of streams and lakes that produce on average 50 million salmon every year, according to the Forest Service. That's about 28 percent of the total annual Alaska salmon harvest. These fish sustain the needs of anglers, commercial fishermen, and people who fish simply to put food on the table.

"It's a primary economic and social anchor for southeast Alaska," Jacobson said.

Mistakes like the damage done to the Harris River watershed wouldn't happen now. Modern forestry laws are designed to prevent the kind of logging that took place at the Harris back in the 1950s and 60s. Since Congress passed the Tongass Timber Reform Act in 1990, cutting trees within 100 feet of a salmon or resident fish stream became illegal. But during the era of lax regulations when roughly a quarter of the Harris watershed was harvested, loggers removed large swaths of trees along stream banks. This exposed rivers to temperature fluctuations, direct sunlight, erosion and sedimentation, all of which can interfere with the ability of

You should see more sport-fishing activity on Gandláay Háanaa.

salmon to spawn. Old-style logging practices often removed streamside trees which would have otherwise naturally fallen into riverbeds, creating pools and gravel conditions that salmon, particularly coho, need to reproduce.

The tour that Jacobson co-led with several of her colleagues in late August included conservation advocates, island residents, members of the local Haida tribe and Forest Service officials, including agency head, Harris Sherman, the Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment. The purpose was to showcase not only the completion the Harris River project–a $3.6 million effort that also included restoration of one of the river's main tributaries, Fubar Creek—but to tell the larger story of where the Forest Service is heading as far as managing fish habitat on the Tongass.

"Overall it's a positive trend that bodes well for fish and the people who rely upon them," said Mark Kaelke, Trout Unlimited's Southeast Alaska project director.

From Fubar to Beautiful

An acronym thought to date back World War II, Fubar—in polite terms—stands for "fouled up beyond all repair." A stronger "f" word is more often used. When it comes to a salmon and trout stream, it's an unfortunate moniker to have. And in Fubar's case, the name aptly described the creek's condition until recently. As with the Harris River, logging took a heavy toll on this creek that historically produced pink, chum and coho salmon, along with steelhead, trout and char.

Massive mudslides caused by soils rendered unstable from clear-cut logging poured sediments into the creek, altered normal flow velocities and changed the river's natural course causing flooding that eventually threatened the stability of

ALASKA
THORNE BAY LODGE

Thorne Bay Lodge
Prince of Wales Island, Alaska

www.thornebaylodge.com
503-680-1755

Self-Guided Hunting and Fishing in Alaska
$1,000 per person for 7 days
Over the counter tags for the last time spring 2012
Nonresidents: 1 black bear per person

1500 miles of road on public land.
Packages Include: Crew Cab Pickup,
4 beds per suite w/ full kitchen
(each suite sleeps 4 people)

a major road artery connecting the communities of Craig and Hydaburg. Culverts installed to alleviate some of the problems failed, blocking fish passage.

In 2004, Fubar became a priority for the Forest Service and repairs got underway. Among other steps, contractors placed large logs with attached root balls into the creek to stabilize the banks and to recreate natural pool conditions for fish. The creek was returned to its normal course in 2006 and within two weeks, salmon began returning, according to a Forest Service overview.

As part of the Forest Service's Harris River tour and celebration, local representatives of the Haida tribe from the village of Hydaburg renamed Fubar Creek to something they considered more culturally appropriate: Gandláay Háanaa, or Beautiful River, in the Haida language. The creek runs through land traditionally used by the Haida tribe.

"Anytime a stream gets damaged like that, it impacts all of us," said Tony Christianson, Hydaburg's mayor. "We're glad it's been put back together."

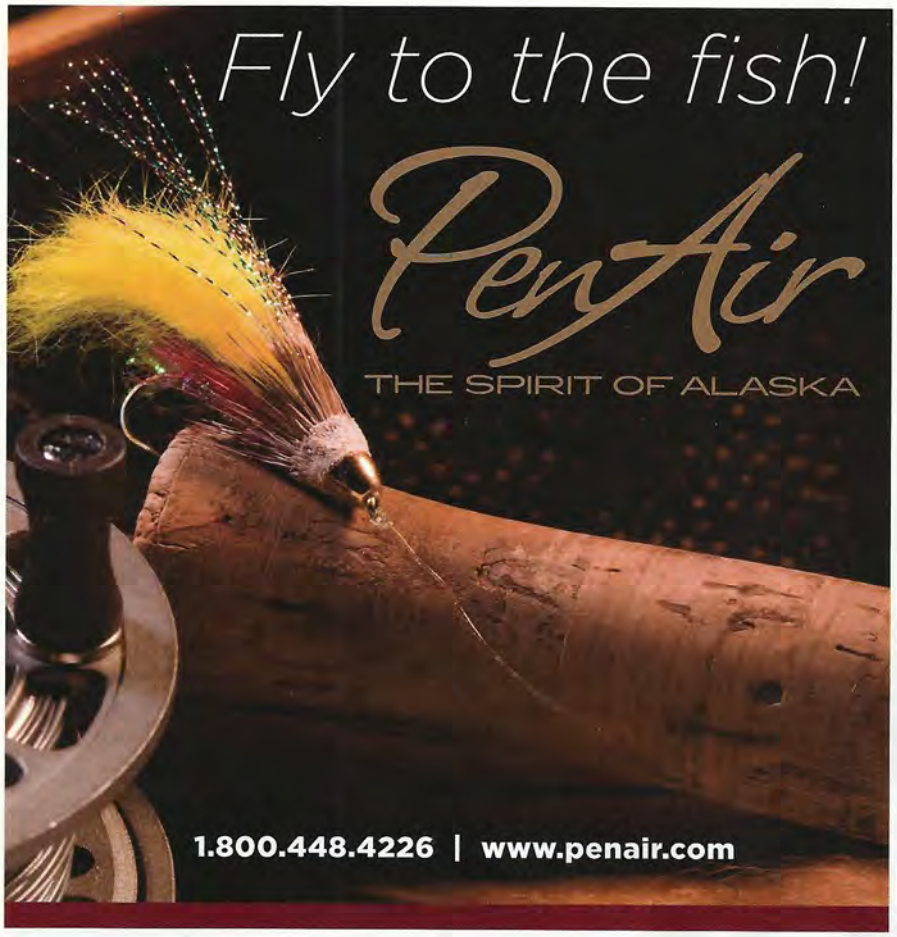
In 2006, two years after the Fubar restoration work began, stream surveys revealed 617 pink salmon in Fubar, according to Forest Service fisheries biologist Sarah Brandy. A year later the number rose to 8,872, suggesting improved spawning habitat.

The Harris River is also showing signs of benefiting from the habitat improvements, particularly for coho salmon, which heavily rely on side channels and tributaries for overwintering. The Forest Service estimates that logging likely reduced coho production by 50 percent on the Harris River. Snorkel surveys conducted on about three miles of the river in the 1980s showed an average yearly count of about 800 to 900 adult coho. Fisheries biologists estimated the full river count at over 1,500 adults.

The Forest Service is expecting that the Harris River restoration effort will eventually result in an escapement of 2,500 adults, according to Ron Medel, Forest Service fishery biologist. Those increased coho numbers should benefit commercial, sport and subsistence fishermen alike, according to Forest Service officials.

Part of the restoration in the Harris and Fubar project involved building trails and improving access so that the public can more easily use the rivers for recreation, particularly angling.

"We expect to see more sport fishing activity on the Harris River and on Gandláay Háanaa. That'll be good for the island's economy and good for anglers,"



said Maeve Taylor, a recreation staff officer with the Forest Service on the Tongass National Forest.

A Salmon Forest

The Harris and Fubar projects are part of a policy transition on the Tongass that has garnered national media attention over the past year.

Fisheries supporters in particular were encouraged by a Forest Service announcement in May 2010 that the federal agency is shifting direction in how it manages the country's largest national forest. After many decades of prioritizing "getting out the cut"—that is, arranging timber sales in old-growth forest to supply two large pulp mills and some sawmills in Southeast—the Forest Service said that it would transition to a policy that focuses on second-growth management, forest restoration and industries such as fishing, ocean products, renewable energy, tourism and recreation. It was a monumental course correction that is still in its early stages.

Conservationists seem encouraged.

"For the first time in a long while, we have an opportunity now to do things right in the Tongass and make salmon and trout conservation a management priority. These fish support thousands of commercial- and sport-fishing jobs and sustain the cultures and lifestyles of southeast Alaskans. It's the right time to focus on watershed-level conservation and restoration, protecting the places that produce the largest numbers of salmon and trout," said Andrew Thoms, executive director of the Sitka Conservation Society.

Kaelke, of Trout Unlimited, noted that in addition to producing about 28 percent of Alaska's overall salmon catch, the Tongass contributes some 30 percent of salmon harvested on the West Coast. He also points to an economic study his group commissioned in early 2011 that showed commercial, sport and traditional fisheries for salmon and trout contribute roughly $1 billion to the southeast Alaska economy annually and employ some one in ten residents. For these reasons alone, investing in conserving and restoring the places that produce these fish makes good financial sense, he said.

"Watershed restoration puts people to work and it puts fish back in rivers. It's a win-win solution for everyone," Kaelke said.

Although it's still just one year out from having made the transition announcement, the federal agency is showing signs that it is committed to its policy shift. A Forest Service list of watershed restoration efforts shows that 2010 was a banner year for this type of work. In his public remarks after touring the Harris and Fubar projects, Undersecretary of Agriculture Harris Sherman praised the efforts made by the agency he directs and the conservation groups involved in restoration.

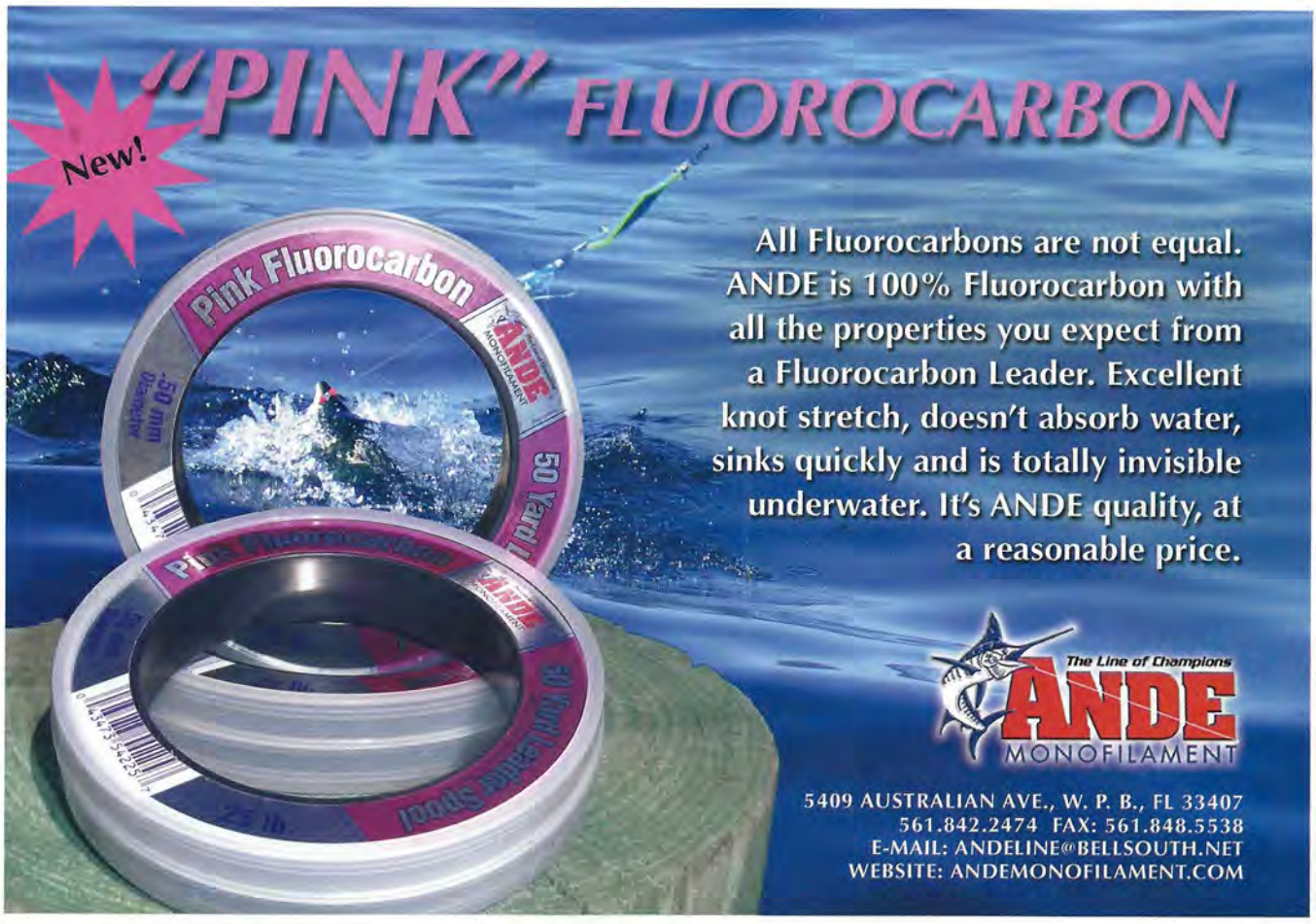
"It's impressive, and it's making a difference," said Sherman.

The Forest Service has a list of some 68 Tongass watersheds that need restoration. Of these, the Forest Service plans to fix at least seven of the most "high-priority" ones over the next five years. The agency is expected to award millions of dollars in contracts for stream habitat improvements, road work, and thinning of overgrown forest stands to make them more usable by wildlife.

The Sitkoh River is among them.

Sitkoh in the Works

Located about 70 miles from the picturesque fishing and tourist town of Sitka, the Sitkoh River used to be one of southeast Alaska's prime coho salmon producers that also hosted significant numbers of



pink salmon and steelhead. In the 1970s, logging damaged spawning and rearing habitat along the river, situated near the confluence of Peril and Chatham straits.

In a public-private partnership next summer involving the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited and the Sitka Conservation Society, the Forest Service will turn its attention to the Sitkoh River. Work scheduled for the summer of 2012 includes fixing fish passage problems, placing log structures in the river to create habitat and rechanneling the river so that it follows its historic course. The $350,000 project has received support from the business community in Sitka as well as fishermen and conservationists.

"To maintain our commercial fisheries and support the needs of subsistence harvesters, healthy salmon spawning streams and rivers are vital. We support the Sitkoh River restoration project and wish to see more of it in southeast Alaska," said Garry White, executive director of the Sitka Economic Development Association, last winter when the project was announced.

Mike Trotter, a sport-fishing guide who owns Baranof Wilderness Lodge, agreed. "Our economy and lifestyle are heavily tied to fishing, and because that's the case, the forest surrounding us should be managed for fish first. More watersheds that produce large volumes of fish should be managed as fish factories where the clean water and undisturbed habitat that produce these fish are left in their natural state so that they can continue to give back, year after year," Trotter told the Juneau Empire last spring.

An Example for Other Places

One of the highlights of the Prince of the Wales tour was a stop along Gandláay Háanaa where the visitors saw schools of chum salmon making their way up the creek to spawn—fish that might not have been there had the restoration not occurred.

Randy Hagenstein, state director of The Nature Conservancy, the lead private partner on the project, said it was a heartening and tangible sign that the large investment his group and the Forest Service made is paying dividends.

"When you see salmon in a restored pool in Gandláay Háanaa and Harris River, you're seeing the benefits of watershed restoration firsthand," said Hagenstein.

In his public remarks after touring the Harris and Fubar watershed restoration, USDA Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment Sherman indicated that he wants to see more fish habitat conservation and restoration take place on the Tongass. Sherman said that the ever-contentious Tongass, which has spawned some of the most heated environmental battles in the nation, could actually be a model for other parts of the country where salmon are in trouble.

"Investing in watershed restoration is essential for the communities in southeast Alaska for salmon, and for the economy," said Sherman "I'm impressed by the unusual level of commitment and collaboration in the Tongass. It's an example of what can happen elsewhere in the United States."

Sherman noted that he was named after his grandfather and that he never particularly liked the first name, Harris. But after visiting the restored Tongass river that bears his same name, his tune was changing. "I'm starting to think it's okay," Sherman said.

Paula Dobbyn is a writer and communications professional who lives in Anchorage. She's a former print and broadcast journalist who specialized in environmental and business reporting. Dobbyn holds a masters degree in human rights law. When not working, she loves spending time with her family and sport fishing.