

# My turn: The past and future of the Tongass

By Dr. Walter Soboleff | Juneau Empire

When I was born in Killisnoo, in 1908, the Tongass National Forest had just celebrated its first birthday. President Theodore Roosevelt set aside this land and water when Killisnoo was a bustling, productive community which produced much wealth. We processed everything from herring to whales and used everything from blueberries to Sitka Spruce. Nearby Angoon provided labor to Killisnoo, to canneries in Hood Bay, Hawk Inlet and the mines in Juneau. A coal mine was worked in Angoon as trees were cut to provide for buildings, heating and docks. We utilized our resources.

President Roosevelt, the great conservationist, proclaimed:

"And now, first and foremost you can never forget for a moment what is the object of our forest policy. That is not to preserve the forests because they are beautiful, though that is good in itself, not because they are refuges for the wild creatures of the wilderness, though that too is good in of itself; but the primary object of our forest policy, as the land policy of the United States, is making of prosperous homes. It is part of the traditional policy of home making in our country. Every other consideration comes as secondary. You yourselves have got to keep this practical object before your minds; to remember that a forest which contributes nothing to the wealth, progress or safety of the country is of no interest to the government and should be of little interest to the forester. Your attention must be directed to the preservation of the forests, not an end in itself, but as a means of preserving and increasing the prosperity of the nation."

As we, the people and communities of the Tongass spent the next 50 years working together to share in this wealth with the United States, we mostly got along. Some newcomers were not friendly and brought bad manners with them and worse. Nonetheless, we welcomed them as we worked our fisheries, our timberlands and local mines while continuing our customary and traditional activities which have sustained us from the beginning. The economy prior to statehood offered the people of Southeast choices, something we no longer seem to have despite many advances in health care and many dollars spent on education.

With statehood, the Tongass and then I turned 50. The promise of a brighter future shone as we Alaskans would finally be "equal." The federal government invested in clean hydro-electric projects planned to power all our communities with affordable electricity. Alaskan Natives would be able to settle our claims for loss of aboriginal rights and for the first time stand side by side with Alaskans who homesteaded their lands. We understood from watching the treatment of our brothers and sisters in the Lower 48 that broken promises were the rule but we still believed this need not be so.

So, the Tongass just celebrated its 100th and Alaska is coming up on its 50th which is way too fast for my liking and I ask where we are today? Are we walking side by side with our fellow citizens, our fellow Alaskans? Do we have the opportunities that existed

prior to Statehood? Are we able to utilize our lands and waters as a means to create energy, jobs and wealth for our families?

Our villages today suffer in a way I have never seen. Angoon fights for its survival. As a member of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and a witness to the work of the Lord, I have found the energy to share openly, firmly and with resolve the need to address the condition of our people with those who have come to live with us. Sadly, our work is not nearly done.

The federal government controls the land in Southeast Alaska and we rely on their word and commitment in our dealings. The Tongass was intended to create the type of wealth and security known from time immemorial by my people. Angoon has survived millennia and overcome many changes and is prepared to continue to contribute if allowed to do so.

- Dr. Walter Soboleff is a Tlingit spiritual leader and elder statesman who lives in Juneau.