

April 28, 2008  
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Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
709 Hart Senate Office Bldg.  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Gentlefolk:

I write this letter regarding HR 3560, as the Conservation Chair of the Glacier Grotto, a member group of the National Speleological Society, and as a director of the Tongass Cave Project, a project of the National Speleological Society. Thus, I comment only on the bill as it relates to the karst and cave resources of the Tongass National Forest.

While I laud the bill's intention of fulfilling ANCSA claims, I believe that, there are areas that must be excluded from selection. Currently, Sealaska is proposing 74,000 acres as economic development areas, slated for industrial scale timber harvest. Of these, over 52,000 acres, or 71%, lie atop karstlands, areas of soluble bedrock that contain caves and underground drainage.

The Federal Cave Resource Protection Act of 1988 (FCRPA) directs Federal land managers to "secure, protect, and preserve significant caves on Federal lands for the perpetual use, enjoyment, and benefit of all people". Caves are an integral component of the karst systems that contain them, and thus, protecting the caves implicitly mandates protecting the karstlands that surround them.

I believe that conveyance of karstlands and caves to a private entity violates the FCRPA and that all karstlands should be removed from those areas permissible for selection and conveyance from the Tongass National Forest to Sealaska Corporation.

The Forest Service has located, documented, and mapped many thousands of karst features within the limestone and marble bedrock of the Forest. Cavers have spent many months underground, mapping extensive systems with great hydrological significance. These caves contain the only good paleontological record of ancient animals and humans in Southeast Alaska due to the stable environment found in caves, and the chemically basic nature of the bedrock and water that preserves bones, unlike the acidic surface materials. They also contain important archeological records, including the oldest human remains in Alaska. Disturbance of the caves or the karst containing them would have serious negative consequences for these deposits, which are providing important insights into how the America's Ire peopled, and the routes humans used in migrating to North America. They also provide important insights into potential effects of climate change.

The Karst and Cave Resource Significance Assessment, Ketchikan Area, Tongass National Forest, Alaska, prepared in 1993 by the Ozark Underground Laboratory under contract with the US Forest Service, Tongass National Forest, determined that the karst and caves of Southeast Alaska (specifically the Ketchikan Area of the Tongass National Forest) are internationally significant because of their unique archipelago setting in largely undisturbed high latitude temperate coniferous rainforest, the only place in the world this occurs. In addition, there is a tremendous diversity of karst features present that are well preserved and at very high densities. Finally, the report cites the presence of internationally significant paleontological and

archeological deposits important in determining prehistoric colonization of the continent and in understanding climatic changes and their effects.

The report continues by listing important aspects of the Tongass caves and karst that are significant at a national level. These include dissolution rates of 4-8 times that of most of the rest of American karstlands, meaning these caves are growing extremely rapidly. They contain abundant and unique mineral deposits including moonmilk. There are also unique species of invertebrates associated with these systems and the caves are used by large mammals to an extent not seen in the lower 48 states.

Economically critical is the fact that waters flowing from these areas support some of the most productive fisheries streams in Southeast Alaska, much more productive than comparable streams emanating from adjacent non-carbonate areas.

Finally, the recreational potential for exploring these largely untouched caves and karstlands is of great national significance, with great potential draw for many independent travelers.

The Forest Service has developed a management program designed to protect all these resources while attempting to extract resources where and when appropriate. The Forest Service has developed this program over 15 years of intense effort, collaborating with scientists, cavers, and land managers in a process that is ongoing. Studies of the dynamics of the systems are just beginning to provide good data, as is monitoring of the effects of past harvest. This management plan, as incorporated in Standards and Guidelines in the Tongass Land Management Plan and its appendices relies on the FCRPA which, as noted above mandates Federal Land Managers to “secure, protect, and preserve significant caves on Federal lands for the perpetual use, enjoyment, and benefit of all people”. Caves are an integral component of the karst systems that contain them, and thus to protect caves, it is essential to preserve a functional karst system. Very special management practices are required to provide this protection.

Private lands in Alaska are governed by the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act of 2000 and the Alaska Forest Practices Regulations, published in 2000. Neither of these documents provides any protection for karstlands or caves. There is no state cave protection act. Thus, conveyance of karstlands to private entities effectively eliminates all the protections mandated under the FCRPA. Furthermore, public access for recreation in conveyed lands containing caves and karst will no longer be guaranteed

HR3560 attempts to finalize land selection and conveyance to Sealaska Corporation, a laudable goal that needs to be completed. Whether such selections should be allowed out of the “ANCSA Box” is beyond the scope of this letter. However, it is clear to us that if lands “outside-the-box” are selected, that the FCRPA requires that karstlands and their caves be excluded from selection. I approve of the effort to finish the ANCSA process, believe that it would be illegal for lands containing karst and caves to be included in the conveyances that fulfill this Federal obligation to the native corporation.

Sincerely,

Stephen W. Lewis,  
Director, Tongass Cave Project  
Conservation Chair, Glacier Grotto