



# Stronger Together | 2021

Alaska Annual Report







## Director's Letter

Like any parent, I have big dreams for my children. Lasting love. Meaningful work. A life of endless joy. Above all I dream that their generation inherits a healthier planet than the one we have today.

When I think of the numerous challenges facing our world—the loss of forests and species, the rapidly changing climate—it feels daunting. But then I go to work, with the scientists, community leaders, and many, many others who are doing their best to turn things around. They bring their energy, their rock-solid commitment and the very best ideas, and I feel hope.

As we take on the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change there's a lot at stake—and so much to gain. TNC is embarking on ambitious 2030 goals to secure a thriving planet for people and nature. Alaska's contributions to meeting those goals simply cannot be overstated.

TNC is drawing on the power of nature to halt the most disastrous impacts of climate change and stop the loss of biodiversity. Across Alaska, places like Bristol Bay, the Tongass and the Arctic hold great potential for securing nature-based solutions. But those must be paired with community-led commitments to equitable, sustainable economic development and a new kind of conservation that understands people are an inseparable part of a healthy environment.

With the help of our partners and supporters, we're pursuing the science and innovation needed for a more sustainable future. We're investing in natural climate solutions to protect forests and store carbon, and novel initiatives to sustain thriving fisheries and biodiversity. And we're working alongside Indigenous leaders and local communities across the state who are eager and willing to light the way and help us safeguard Alaska's cherished way of life.

If the opportunity is tremendous so, too, is the responsibility that's now before us. Together, we can confront the challenges of our time with the hope we bring to our work each and every day.

-Steve Cohn, Alaska State Director

“I rest easier at night knowing that if we continue to work together we can make a big impact for not just my children but all of humanity.”

-Steve Cohn, Alaska State Director, The Nature Conservancy Alaska



## Alaska by the Numbers



Alaska's ice, snow and glaciers feed a vast system of free-flowing lakes and rivers that produces robust salmon runs found nowhere else on the planet. **Last year 858 million pounds of salmon were pulled from Alaska's waters**—enough to feed every American more than 2.5 pounds of salmon.



The men and women who make their living on **Alaska's seas provide more than 60 percent of the nation's seafood harvest**, delivering halibut, salmon, black cod and more to tables around the world.



With **half of the nation's carbon stored in Alaska's forests**, soils and wetlands, it is clear that a climate strategy for a better world begins with a climate-smart Alaska.



**Home to 95 percent of the nation's remaining intact lands and waters**, Alaska's abundant natural wealth creates an opportunity to build a thriving nature-based economy with economic dividends from nature's own portfolio—its salmon, forest and ocean resources.



**Alaska is huge, with very few people: 2.5 times bigger than Texas**, with only 2.5 percent of its population. Only by working together can we sustain Alaska's incredible natural resources, build nature-based economies, lead bold climate solutions, and elevate Indigenous authority in conservation.





In Alaska, people are connected to the land in ways that have become increasingly rare.



## How we work

Alaska's marine waters, rivers and streams, its forests, taiga and tundra provide food and support a traditional way of life for Alaska's original inhabitants. Its abundant resources provide an economic foundation for the state's many remote communities.

Here, people and communities rely on a healthy environment to sustain them—as it has for thousands of years. And nature depends on us to care for it, as Alaska's Indigenous peoples have done for millennia.

That's why—with our partners—we're creating a new kind of conservation, one that reimagines how we live and work in the world around us. People are a part of the fabric of nature here, as they always have been. To create solutions that last, we must ensure our communities are healthy too—with dynamic cultures and economies—and that people are connected to nature in meaningful ways. We can do this by centering conservation around the knowledge, needs and priorities of those who rely on the land for cultural, spiritual, economic and physical well-being.

**We must put aside our differences and collaborate where we can because we are stronger together.**

This year TNC helped raised over \$9 million to support other organizations that are doing good work in the state, including the Seacoast Trust and the Bristol Bay Victory Challenge. By joining forces and leveraging funding and efforts, we can amplify and multiply our impact.







## The Future of the Forest

Once ground zero for the timber wars, the Tongass has become a model of forest management. Across the region, parties once at odds are coming together to create a sustainable future.

For nearly half a century the 17 million-acre Tongass National Forest has been embroiled in controversy over old-growth logging. Tired of the endless timber wars, TNC and its partners, including Sealaska—the Alaska Native regional corporation for Southeast Alaska—and a handful of tribal and non-profit entities, co-founded the Sustainable Southeast Partnership (SSP) ten years ago. This regional network has people, planet and profits as its bottom line.

SSP has revolutionized the way partners work together toward a just transition based on community and environmental sustainability. This summer Sealaska, the region's largest holder of private timberlands, announced that it was halting timber operations and would instead invest in a sustainable future for the region. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that it intends to end large-scale old-growth logging in the Tongass, reverse the recent Roadless Rule decision that opened new portions of the forest to logging, commit to government-to-government tribal consultation, and invest \$25 million in local sustainability initiatives like SSP.

In September, Sealaska—along with TNC, the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Spruce Root and other regional partners—launched the Seacoast Trust, a permanent funding mechanism to fully support and expand SSP for generations to come, because by working together, SSP partners can achieve so much more than any individual entity can achieve on its own. The trust will support a range of programs like Indigenous Guardians and community forests, as well as efforts to restore and sustain salmon runs, manage healthy forests, establish new forest carbon projects, teach and inspire youth, increase food security and grow prosperous local economies.

Sealaska offered \$10 million to establish the fund, contingent upon match by the partners. To date TNC has pledged \$7 million and helped partners secure another \$2 million in gifts. Only \$1 million needs to be raised to fully match Sealaska's \$10 million offer.



In Southeast Alaska,  
90% of rural households  
in 35 communities  
harvest food from the  
land and the sea.







“Just as Southeast Alaska Native people have been here forever, we are forever investing in the health and well-being of the people and this place with the Seacoast Trust. Ch’u tleix áwé kugaagastee, let it exist forever.”

-Crystal Nelson, Community Development Specialist, The Nature Conservancy in Alaska, pictured above with her family in Yakutat.

## Kusaxán Tin Yagaxtoodláak: We Will Succeed with Love of People



The Seacoast Trust is designed to provide annual funding for sustainable economic solutions in the Tongass rainforest. It is grounded in Indigenous values, and will fund a different kind of conservation: One that understands people and communities are inseparable components of a healthy environment, and that thriving rivers and forests require mechanisms that shift power and resources to the people living in the region.

### Crystal Nelson | Yankawgé ▪ Gunaaxduji Tláa

The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples have been in Southeast Alaska and the surrounding Canadian areas since the beginning of time, and the lands and waters of the Tongass rainforest are a distinctly Native place. If you visit the ancestral lands of the Tlingit in Dry Bay (pictured top right), you will see landmarks from the creation stories of my people. The giant boulders of the man and dog that turned to stone when Raven flew out of the whale’s belly. The valley where Raven wiped off his beak, cutting jagged angles into the mountain. Raven’s footprints where he dug his feet into the sand as he pulled in the food canoe.

My maternal lineage comes from the Humpback Whale House in Dry Bay that was named after one of these stories in the Raven Cycle, “Raven and the Whale.” I come from the Raven-Coho clan, but there are many clans that come from the Tongass, each one made up of extended families with stories and histories that tie them irrevocably to this land.

It was these kinship structures, our Indigenous values, and the natural abundance of the Tongass that ensured that no one ever went hungry, and no one was ever homeless. Our cultural norms of contributing to the whole connected us to our ancestors and our homelands and allowed us to take care of each other.

That’s why I’m so honored to have been a part of launching the Seacoast Trust, which is community-owned and embodies our Indigenous values. The Seacoast Trust seeks a just transition away from extractive industries like logging, toward a regenerative economy that restores our relationships with our homelands and is once again centered on the people.

The history of the Tongass is marred by environmental conflict as well as colonialism that disconnected Indigenous people from their cultures and homelands and often ignored or vilified those who have called it home for millennia. Since one of the largest factors in the economic and social distress Native communities experience today is a direct result of these forces, one of the ways we can heal is by reconnecting to the land, to the ancestors and to each other.

The definition of healing is to become whole again, and that is what the Seacoast Trust aims to invest in. Taking this holistic, healing approach to conservation will lead to better outcomes for our communities and for our lands.

Learn more at [www.seacoasttrust.org](http://www.seacoasttrust.org).







Nearly 66 million salmon returned to the Bristol Bay watershed this past summer, capping yet another record-breaking fishing season.



## Scaling Up in Bristol Bay

With the tide turning on the Pebble Mine, TNC and its partners have joined forces to secure a resilient economy that honors people, cultures and nature.

The largest wild salmon runs on Earth are found in Alaska's Bristol Bay, where a tapestry of braided rivers, wetlands and tundra produce half the planet's sockeye salmon. For over 10,000 years, the Yup'ik, Alutiiq and Dena'ina peoples have stewarded these lands and waters, and salmon are central to their cultures and livelihoods. Today, a \$2 billion commercial salmon fishery provides for people across the globe.

For more than a decade, tribes and organizations across Bristol Bay have united in opposition to the Pebble Mine—a huge open-pit mine that would excavate the heart of the region's world-class salmon spawning habitat. Efforts to safeguard the watershed are gaining ground and the news from Bristol Bay this year is exciting. Following the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' denial of the Pebble Limited Partnership permit application in November of 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency in November of 2021 announced it would reinstate work on a 404(c) Clean Water Act process, which could protect the Pebble deposit from future mining.

The communities in the region have been successful in creating new models of Indigenous-led conservation and building new opportunities for economic development. We were able to assist with some of these, one of which—the Diamond Point project—you can read about in the following spread. We are also working with a coalition of tribes, corporations, nonprofits and other entities in the region to secure permanent protection of the watershed and long-term funding for sustainable economic and community development through legislation.

In cooperation with our Indigenous partners in the region, we helped launch programs like Ciulistet—an Indigenous leadership program—and the Nilavena Sustainability Forum—a partnership of the six Lake Iliamna communities working to implement community well-being and conservation solutions together.

With each of these successes we get one step closer to long-term protection of the waters that produce nearly 60 million salmon each year, support an amazing array of life, and sustain the region's 31 tribes as well as a globally-significant sustainable commercial fishery.





“We do this work, it’s who we are. These Indigenous values are strong and alive, and we instill these values in our kids. This is their legacy and it’s been like this for thousands of years.”

-AlexAnna Salmon, President, Igiugig Village Council



### Keeper of the Northern Corridor

In 2014, the Alaska Native Village of Igiugig acquired land at Diamond Point (pictured above) on Cook Inlet, but the seller retained the rock and wharfage rights. When Diamond Point was proposed as a port for the Pebble Mine without the tribe’s consent, the village purchased the outstanding royalty rights, blocking the proposed Pebble Mine’s preferred location for a deep-water port for mineral exports.

Leaders from the village invited The Nature Conservancy to help with this project and we provided appraisal, legal and fundraising assistance. Together we secured a major victory in the efforts to stop the Pebble Mine, but for Igiugig the project is of deeper importance.

### AlexAnna Salmon (Yup’ik/Aleut)



The Dena’ina people in the Lake Iliamna region had historic routes over to Cook Inlet, for carrying resources from the inlet to our area and important trading routes for our economy. Diamond Point is an ancient lived landscape where the ancestors would gather cockles and access salt water. My grandfather had his cabin at Amakdedori, south of Diamond Point. Amakdedori comes from the Yup’ik word Amartetuli that means, “The place you carry things across.”

When the Native allotment era came to Alaska in 1906, heads of households were offered 160 acres. Many of those were never honored—like my grandfather’s allotment at Amakdedori—another example of how we were displaced from our homelands. Over a century later, our tribe owned zero land. I’m on a mission to purchase the Native allotments and hopefully get our voice heard and piece our homelands back together.

Diamond Point is a monumental project, part of bigger self-governance and self-determination efforts. It was acquired as part of a 30-year vision for our people. The rock will be used for shoreline protection, which is so important given that a lot of our coastline and villages are falling into the water. It is part of what we can offer to the climate solution, as well as building capacity and taking ownership of our lands and resources and becoming self-sustaining.

With this purchase, the tribe can hold the land in perpetuity and do what is best for our people—on our terms. Biodiversity can be protected, and we can generate an income stream for our communities that are in dire economic straits. This might have been an unusual arrangement for TNC, but we are going to accomplish greater good with this acquisition, because when you include the people in conservation efforts, you have your built-in sustainability. We’re breaking molds because the solutions of today need to be creative and we share our stories to help inspire others of the realm of possibilities.



## Climate Opportunities

From its position on the front lines of climate change, Alaska is poised to lead the world in a transition to a clean, equitable and resilient economy.

This year TNC launched the Alaska Climate Opportunities Assessment. It has proven to be an essential forum for learning from and networking with Alaskans who are exploring novel climate solutions and seeking to create opportunities that benefit people and nature. We commissioned research papers on Alaska's renewable energy economy, climate-resilient housing and infrastructure, and natural climate solutions. Then we convened online events featuring panelists from across Alaska's vast geography and a broad spectrum of disciplines.

The year also yielded a significant climate policy success for Alaska. In November, all three members of Alaska's congressional delegation voted in support of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The sweeping legislation contains new commitments for building a clean energy future and a wide range of investments benefitting communities across Alaska, including clean water, broadband access and energy grid modernization.

Lastly, TNC continues to invest in natural climate solutions such as forest carbon sequestration in the lush rainforests of Southeast Alaska. While this comprehensive research initiative is still underway, it promises to answer important questions about the role the Tongass rainforest and private timberlands play in sequestering carbon.



“The Alaska Climate Opportunities Assessment showed in powerful ways that Alaska is already leading the world with innovative solutions for addressing climate change and that there is so much more that we can and will do.”

-Stephanie Holthaus, Climate Action Advisor, The Nature Conservancy in Alaska

## Accelerating Solutions



Isaac Vanderburg is the CEO of Launch Alaska, a deployment accelerator that connects climate technology startups with infrastructure and asset owners in Alaska. He is also a founding board member of Earthshot Ventures, a venture capital fund investing in climate tech companies. He was a panelist for the Alaska Climate Opportunities Assessment.

### Isaac Vanderburg | CEO, Launch Alaska

I'm drawn to people building things to better themselves, their families and their communities. After college I joined the Peace Corps working with micro-enterprise folks in rural Central America. Since then, I've been helping other entrepreneurs, starts-ups and companies grow. When the opportunity came to help create an accelerator in Alaska, I realized this is how it all blends together—the entrepreneurial and climate work.

Launch Alaska is an 8-month shark tank that starts with a bunch of climate tech startups and those still in the program at the end have an opportunity to deploy their tech in Alaska. We have also begun innovation partnerships with Alaskan communities to think through the steps to decarbonize and electrify and get funding for projects on the ground.

Alaska has a massive opportunity to be a leader in deploying climate tech and to model to the rest of the world how an oil and gas state becomes an energy state. Alaska also has a unique opportunity to lead in the justice, equity, diversity and inclusion space, because of the Alaska Native leadership in the state. I think we should be showing the rest of the world how you make an energy transition while bringing everyone along in a just and equitable way.





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Alaska Program**

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Our vision is a world where  
the diversity of life thrives,  
and people act to conserve  
nature for its own sake and its  
ability to fulfill our needs and  
enrich our lives.

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Bethany Goodrich; Pages 3-4: Sean  
Neilson, Sean Neilson, Wayde Carroll,  
Wayde Carroll, Sean Neilson; Pages  
5-6: Bob Waldrop, Bethany Goodrich,  
Bethany Goodrich, Bethany Goodrich;  
Pages 7-8: Bethany Goodrich, Bethany  
Goodrich, Mark Kelley, Sean Neilson;  
Pages 9-10: Jason Ching; Pages 11-12:  
Brian Adams, Carl Johnson, Acacia  
Johnson, Nathaniel Wilder, Carl Johnson;  
Pages 13-14: Sean Neilson, Andre Horton;  
Back cover: Bob Waldrop

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Nature Conservancy in Alaska  
on paper containing 30%  
post-consumer recycled fiber.



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