



# Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy Yakutat Ranger District

Prepared by: Alaska Trails

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## **CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS**

- Unlike many other Ranger Districts in the Tongass National Forest, trails in the Yakutat Ranger District are primarily used for fishing. Secondary uses include hunting and foraging for mushrooms, berries and other plants. Recreational hiking, backpacking, photography, wildlife viewing and other non-consumptive uses of trails are less common.
- The Yakutat Ranger District deals with an incredible amount of precipitation, even by Southeast Alaska standards.
- Unlike other Ranger Districts, the Yakutat Ranger District's trails are primarily located in the flat terrain of the Yakutat Forelands. Only one trail approaches the nearest mountains.
- The combination of intense rainfall, flat terrain and widespread muskeg makes trail building and maintenance difficult and expensive.
- Locals expect - and the Ranger District advertises - that most of the trails of the Yakutat Ranger District are best hiked in rubber boots, or even waders. Dry trails are rare.
- The community of Yakutat has seen a precipitous rise in the number of sportfisherman visiting the area. This has affected both the economics of the community and the conditions of the trails.
- The Yakutat Ranger District has lost many positions and employees in the past 10-15 years. Current filled recreation positions are a fraction of prior staffing levels.

***"Every year it feels like we're asked to do more with less"***

- direct quote from Yakutat Ranger District staff



Example of common "trail" conditions on the Yakutat Ranger District; Photo: Haley Johnston

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the direction of the United States Forest Service (USFS), Alaska Trails<sup>1</sup> has taken a community-driven approach to developing the Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy. This work was prepared under a Challenge Cost Share Agreement between the USFS and Alaska Trails. This chapter specifically highlights the current trails status in and around the community of Yakutat and the Yakutat Ranger District. For a more in depth introduction to the entire project, consult the overall Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy Introduction and for more insight into the regional issues, consult the Forest-wide Chapter.

Within this chapter is a discussion of the issues and opportunities facing this community and Ranger District in their pursuit of a sustainable trail system. For the purposes of this project, ***a sustainable trail system is defined as socially relevant and supported, ecologically resilient, and economically viable.*** Building on this information, the chapter identifies priorities for new trails, trail maintenance and trail decommissioning. The chapter also highlights other general approaches, policy changes or actions which could lead to a sustainable trail system.

The goal of every planner, including those who prepared this strategy, is that their work will create tangible results. For this strategy to improve the sustainability of the Yakutat Ranger District's trail system, these recommendations will need to be considered and, where deemed appropriate, implemented.

The staff at Alaska Trails, who prepared this strategy, are immensely grateful to the organizations and individuals who have generously offered their wisdom, insight and feedback as this chapter was developed, including Yakutat Ranger District staff, the City and Borough of Yakutat, community organizations and individuals.



Tracks from one of Yakutat's largest trail user demographics; Photo: Haley Johnston

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<sup>1</sup> [www.alaska-trails.org](http://www.alaska-trails.org)

## **OVERVIEW**

### **Yakutat Ranger District Overview**

The Yakutat Ranger District encompasses 1.7 million acres of forest, muskeg, mountains, glaciers, lakes, and rivers. Geographic boundaries of the District are Yakutat Bay in the west, the Alsek River in the east, and from the coast across the Brabazon Mountain range to the Canadian border. The District includes the 350,000 acre Russell Fjord Wilderness Area, Hubbard Glacier Geological Area, Yakutat Glacier, Harlequin Lake and world class beaches.

Most of the District trailheads are accessed via the local road system with the exception of trails in the Italio River and Dry Bay areas. Many trails were originally game trails, and are remote and primitive. Few trails have been officially “designed” and even fewer are sustainable. Most of the District’s trails access fishing areas, especially along the Situk River. Bear encounters along trails are common, as bears use these same trails to access their feeding areas. See map of the Yakutat Ranger District on the following page.

### **Yakutat Community Overview**

Yakutat is located 225 miles northwest of Juneau, isolated on the stretch of land that connects the Inside Passage to the rest of Alaska. The community is surrounded by Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and the Tongass National Forest at the mouth of Yakutat Bay. Due to its location on a protected bay, Yakutat was historically, and continues to be, one of the few refuges for watercraft along a very long coastline.

Yakutat is home to Eyak and Tlingit Alaska Native people. As of the 2020 census<sup>2</sup> 662 people resided in Yakutat. The largest demographic group is Alaska Native people who comprise over a third of the population. The town was established as a Russian fort in the late 1700s, and like much of the region, later saw gold mining, fur, and timber booms. Today, fishing drives the economy.

Fishing is integral to not just the economy of Yakutat, but also the culture, identity and lifestyles of Yakutat’s residents. Most people living in Yakutat depend, to some degree, on subsistence hunting and fishing. The economic impacts of fishing include commercial fishing, fish processing and in recent years, sportfishing and fishing tourism has become an increasingly important sector of the local economy.

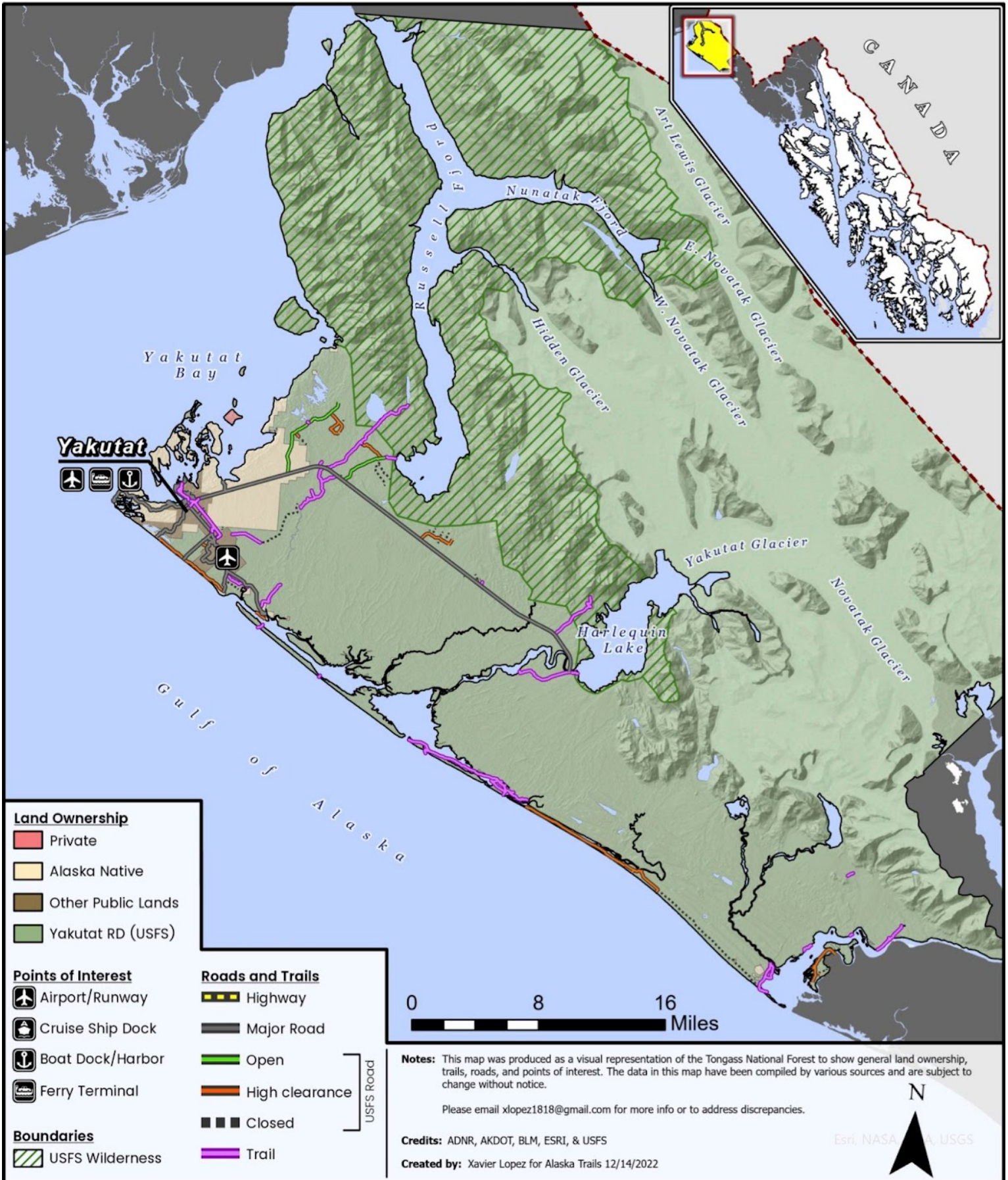
Yakutat receives daily jet service from Anchorage and Juneau. The Alaska Marine Highway ferry also stops several times a month during the summer. Like most of Southeast Alaska, Yakutat is not connected to the rest of the state by road. However, it does have a local road system. See map of the community of Yakutat on the following page.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/yakutatcityandboroughalaska>

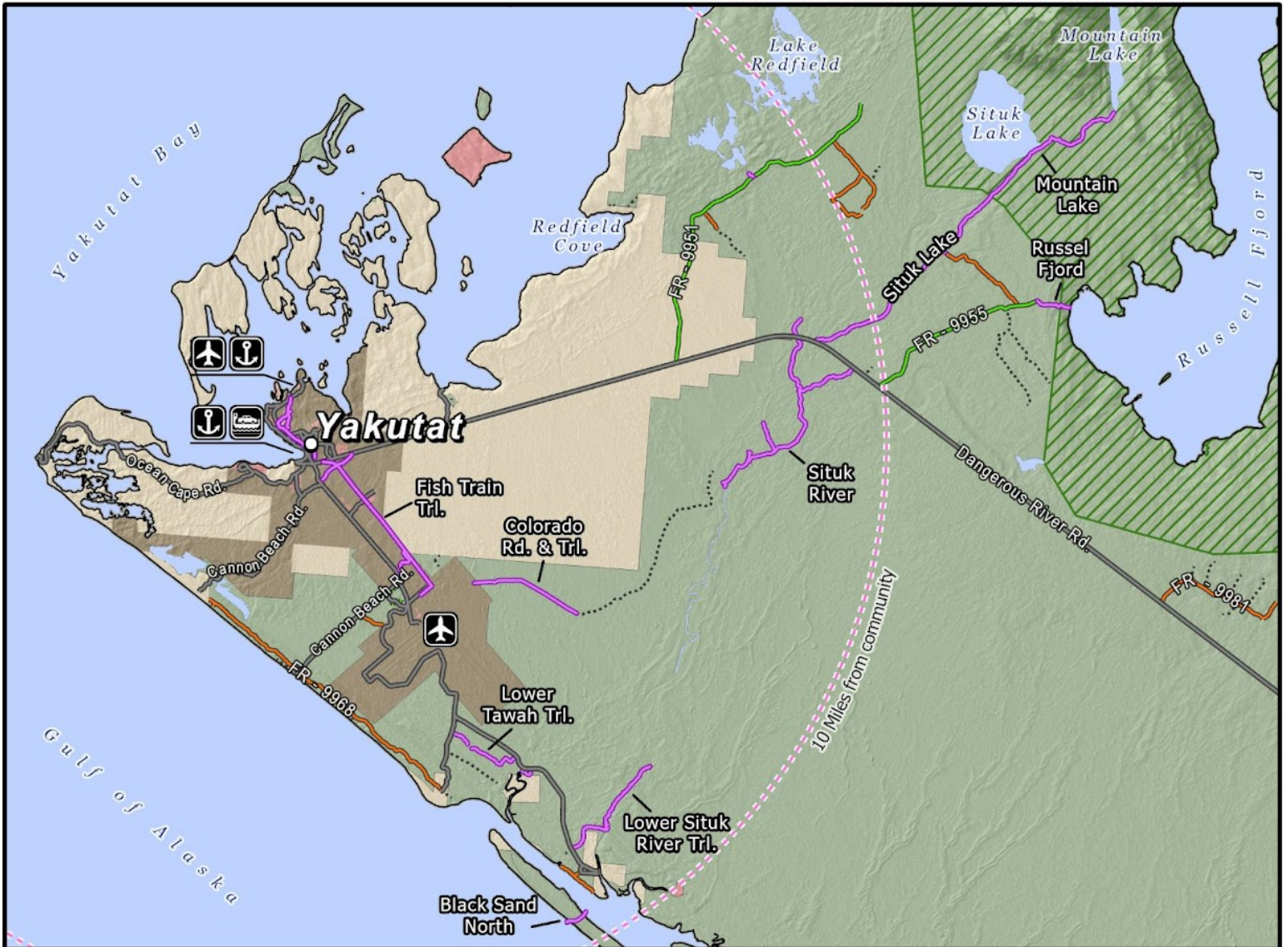
# Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy

## Yakutat Ranger District



# Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy

## City of Yakutat



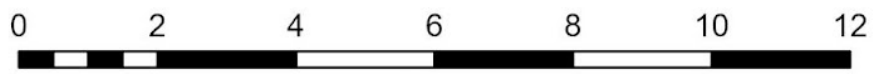
**Notes:** This map was produced as a visual representation of the Tongass National Forest to show general land ownership, trails, roads, and points of interest. The data in this map have been compiled by various sources and are subject to change without notice.

Please email [xlopez1818@gmail.com](mailto:xlopez1818@gmail.com) for more info or to address discrepancies.

**Credits:** ADNR, Agnewbeck Consulting, AKDOT, BLM, ESRI, & USFS

**Created by:** Xavier Lopez for Alaska Trails 12/14/2022

<b>Points of Interest</b>		<b>Land Ownership</b>	
Airport/Runway	Private	Alaska Native	Other Public Lands
Cruise Ship Dock	Yakutat RD (USFS)		
Boat Dock/Harbor			
Ferry Terminal			
<b>Boundaries</b>			
USFS Wilderness			
<b>Roads and Trails</b>			
Highway	Open	High clearance	Closed
Major Road			
Trail			



Miles



## Background Documents

The Yakutat Ranger District Chapter of the Sustainable Trails Strategy utilized several previous and ongoing recreation planning efforts. Resources that were consulted for this chapter include:

- 2008 Yakutat Community Facility Plan
- 2012 Yakutat Sustainable Outdoor Recreation Action Plan
- Dangerous River- Italo Cabin Trail; Route Analysis



Sunset seen over Monti Bay from the community of Yakutat; Photo: Haley Johnston

## **CURRENT USES AND TRENDS**

### **Community Use Trends**

Much of Yakutat's population are of Eyak and/or Tlingit descent. 37.8% of the community is Alaska Native and another 14.6% of the population is identified as two or more races. Like many rural and predominantly Alaska Native communities, the people of Yakutat lead lives that blend modern conveniences with deep connections to Alaska Native cultural traditions. Access to subsistence activities, connection to the natural landscape and protection of habitats are all important elements of community life. As such, recreation uses by the community of Yakutat are centered around subsistence gathering, fishing, and hunting.

Many residents and visitors utilize the road system that extends from Yakutat for these recreational and subsistence purposes. Certain trails and areas along the road system see greater use during different times of year depending on hunting seasons and which species of fish are present.

### **Tourism Trends**

Visitors to Yakutat primarily engage in sport fishing for both freshwater and saltwater species, utilizing USFS trails to access rivers, streams and lakes for this purpose. The Situk River, and the USFS trails that access it, are important resources for local and visiting fisherman. Lodging of visiting fishermen is an important sector of the local economy.

#### Alaska Visitor Statistic Program (AVSP) - VII (2016) Data of Interest<sup>3</sup>

While this data is included in other Ranger District chapters of the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy, unfortunately the Alaska Travel Industry Association's AVSP does not capture data for Yakutat.

#### USFS National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) Data of Interest<sup>4</sup>

The most recent USFS National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) Data for Yakutat Ranger District is from 2017. The NVUM was designed for National and Forest-level analysis, not Ranger District level. Unfortunately, the NVUM data lumps together visitors to Yakutat, Petersburg and Wrangell Ranger Districts, making the data of limited value for individual Ranger Districts or communities. There are very different use patterns between Yakutat and these other Ranger Districts due to a variety of factors including geographic location, method by which visitors and other users arrive, topography, number and size of communities near or within the Ranger Districts, and other factors known and unknown. Due to this aggregation, these numbers do not paint an accurate picture of activities in Yakutat Ranger District, but they have been included here because of a lack of other relevant user data.

From the aggregated NVUM data, it is known that there were 283,000 visits<sup>5</sup> in total to the Yakutat, Wrangell and Petersburg Ranger Districts in 2017. Highlights from the NVUM Data include:

- 78% of visitors were less than 25 miles from the survey respondent's home
- 93% of visits were to a single National Forest site during their visit
- 53% of respondents visited the National Forest more than 50 times in the year surveyed.
- The top ten activities in which respondent participated were:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.alaskatia.org/wp-content/uploads/12-AVSP-7-Summ-Profiles-Southeast.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/nvum>

<sup>5</sup> A National Forest Visit is defined as the entry of one person upon a national forest to participate in recreation activities for an unspecified period of time. A National Forest Visit can be composed of multiple Site Visits.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% Participation</b>	<b>% Main Activity</b>	<b>Avg Hours Doing Main Activity</b>
Hiking/Walking	47.4	26.1	1.5
Viewing Natural Features	34.1	10.4	1.4
Fishing	31.0	23.5	5.7
Driving for Pleasure	27.6	10.3	3.1
Viewing Wildlife	21.6	5.4	5.2
Relaxing	19.4	3.6	12.7
Gathering Forest Products	8.9	5.3	1.3
Hunting	6.2	5.9	10.7
Nature Study	4.5	0.4	7.2
Visiting Historic Sites	4.2	0.2	3.0



Excellent Outdoor Recreation Facility at Cannon Beach; Photo: Haley Johnston

## **ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Many of the trail-related issues and opportunities that are present in the Yakutat Ranger District are also seen across the Tongass National Forest and its communities. Many of the issues and opportunities that are universal and applicable to the entire Tongass are presented in the Forest-wide chapter. The issues and opportunities presented here focus on those that are particularly relevant to Yakutat.

### **Issues**

- **Lack of staffing** - According to various accounts, 10-15 people were working in the recreation department (trails, cabins, etc.) in the mid-2000s. As of 2022, there are only two full-time employees, with fewer seasonal employees as well. There are currently no cabin staff on the District, despite the fact that Yakutat Ranger District has nine cabins to maintain. Many of these cabins are well-used and several are difficult and or time consuming for Ranger District staff to access and maintain.
- **Hiring Challenges** - the lack of staffing at the Yakutat Ranger District is a multi-faceted issue, exacerbated by the difficulty in filling the positions that are open. Hiring is challenging due to:
  - Low housing inventory - by some estimates 25% of the homes in Yakutat sit empty for much of the year and are utilized by individuals and families who only visit briefly, most during fishing season.
  - Reduced benefits - the USFS payed for 2 RT tickets to Juneau for full-time staff in the 2000s, which is no longer a policy.
  - HR delays - The hiring process is arduous, it recently took 5 months to hire a full-time staff member.
  - Bunk house shortages - the 12 person bunk house would be insufficient to house the staffing required for a large project if the Yakutat Ranger District were to receive funding for such a project
- **Lack of Resources** - there is a perception amongst staff and the public that the timber heavy Districts of the southern Tongass have more staff and resources, including NEPA staff and Landscape Architects. As the Forest supposedly moves from a timber-model to a recreation-model, this disparity is confusing and disheartening for stakeholders.
- **Lack of air taxi service** - There is currently no air taxi service in Yakutat, effectively eliminating most peoples' ability to access the Dry Bay and Italio trails and cabins and other more remote sections of Yakutat Ranger District. Private pilots and those willing to navigate the dangerous, tidally-influenced "trail" along the coast are now the only people able to access this region.

### ***"The North Tongass is at risk of becoming exclusively a playground for millionaires"***

-Concern expressed during community listening session

- **Sourcing materials** - Building and maintaining trails near Yakutat require a significant amount of material as most native soils become waterlogged and muddy. Gravel, geoblock or yellow cedar planking are used to harden, designate and elevate trails. There is currently no crushed gravel source in Yakutat, despite the operation of a state-owned gravel pit nearby. There is no local source for milled lumber suitable to the wet conditions in Yakutat. Thus, all materials must be ordered and shipped, adding to cost and lead times for trail projects. For example, it took two years to receive yellow cedar that was ordered for a project.
- **Mechanized use** - Many of the Yakutat Ranger District trails cross into the Russell Fjord Wilderness, including the Vonderheide, Mountain Lake, Situk Lake, Russell Fiord, and Harlequin Lake trails. Trails staff

are currently not permitted to use chainsaws to maintain these trails. However, until 2015 the Ranger District *was* able to utilize chainsaws in the Russell Fjord Wilderness Area since it was an ANILCA designated wilderness. There is some confusion with District staff as to how or why this changed and why it cannot be remedied. It would require an MRA to use a chainsaw to maintain these trails and they feel the current leadership is not receptive to these requests.

- **Perception of Outfitter/Guide overuse** - The revenues from O/G fees don't nearly cover the maintenance needs resulting from their heavy use of certain trails, leading to user resentment in the North Tongass.

## **Opportunities**

- **Road system** - Because the vast majority of the Yakutat Ranger District's trails can be accessed via the road system, there is a lower barrier to maintenance than in other Ranger Districts with many remote, hard-to-access trails.
- **Staff** - While the Yakutat Ranger District staff has dwindled in the past 10-15 years, there remains a dedicated team of long-term employees. These staff members have weathered the reductions in funding and staffing levels and genuinely care about doing the best work they can for the Ranger District.
- **Community Support** - The Yakutat community uses and appreciates the USFS trails and facilities near their home. They are also excited to embrace some new types of visitors and diversify their tourism industry. As such, they are generally supportive and enthusiastic about maintenance to existing USFS trails and the potential for expanded outdoor recreation infrastructure.

## **COMMUNITY & USER GROUP GOALS**

These goals were articulated in conversations with USFS staff, local residents, permitted outfitters and guides, City and Borough of Yakutat staff, other stakeholders and individuals associated with the community of Yakutat. Additional feedback was received via online surveys. While this plan hopes to capture, to the best of its abilities, the goals of the community of Yakutat, it is acknowledged that there may be community goals that were overlooked, misunderstood or were not captured through these methods.

### **Summary Goals**

- Diversify Yakutat's tourism industry
  - The tourism industry is currently very reliant on sport and charter fishing
  - There is a lot of interest being shown in ecotourism/ethnotourism/cultural tourism and generally non-extractive and more regenerative forms of tourism.
- Maintain the existing USFS infrastructure near Yakutat
  - The damaged, flooded, muddy and dilapidated trails near Yakutat are in need of repair, realignment and maintenance.
- Develop more recreation opportunities for visitors and locals alike
  - Yakutat is a community that, despite challenging weather conditions, enjoys recreation - hunting, fishing, ATV-ing, foraging, hiking, picnicking and surfing are just some of the activities in which local residents engage.
  - More recreation opportunities - either in the form of improved facilities or new facilities are generally supported by the community.



Shore of Russell Fiord, accessed via the Russell Fiord Trail; Photo: Haley Johnston

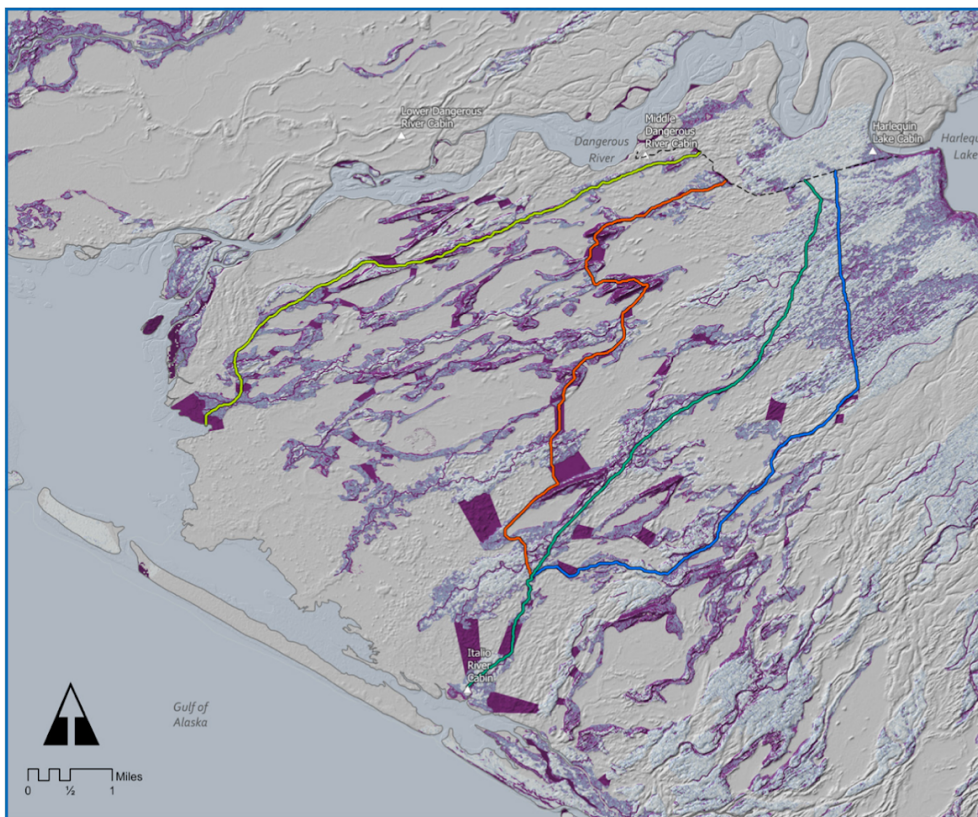
## RECOMMENDED TRAIL PROJECTS

The following are the specific recommendations for trails to improve, build, and/or decommission that have been identified through conversations with USFS staff and the Yakutat community, while addressing the community goals outlined above. In this Ranger District, and throughout the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy those trail projects that are simultaneously beneficial to residents, visitors, and could help increase business and employment opportunities have been prioritized, when possible.

### Recommendations for Trail Building

#### ***Dangerous River-Itallo***

*Note:* The following recommendation comes with the caveat that the Yakutat Ranger District is not prepared for a project of this size. Capacity at the Ranger District will need to increase before it could plan, manage and/or execute this project. The existing portion of the Dangerous River ATV trail has received Great American Outdoors Act funding. Work is expected to be completed by the end of 2024.



#### Least Cost Paths

Initially, four preliminary alternatives were produced from four different origins along the existing Middle Dangerous River Trail, using the “overland route” landscape resistance as a cost surface raster.

An excerpt from the Dangerous River-Itallo Cabin Trail; Route Analysis

*Recommendation for building:* Significant staff time and energy has been devoted to this project, as evidenced by the comprehensive Dangerous River- Itallo Cabin Trail; Route Analysis completed in January of 2022. This project would help reduce negative impacts to wetlands and streams from off-highway vehicle use in the area, provide hunting, fishing and recreation access to the area between the Middle Dangerous River and the Itallo River. The danger of

accessing this region along the tidally influenced coast, coupled with the lack of air taxi service in Yakutat, mean that for many, this region has become inaccessible. This trail project would effectively re-open this area of the north Tongass.

Four potential routes were identified with costs ranging from \$4.47 - \$6.81 million. This would be a wildly expensive project for a Ranger District which currently cannot maintain its existing trail system. While this strategy recommends that this project proceed to the building phase, it should only do so once the maintenance needs addressed here are completed. Diverting the Ranger District's already limited resources to a massive construction project prior to completing the needed maintenance would be irresponsible, only adding to the unachievable maintenance needs of the District.

## **Recommendations for Maintenance**

### ***Situk River Trail***

*Note:* The Situk River Trail has received Great American Outdoors Act Funding. The project is anticipated to be completed in 2025.



An improved, hardened section of the Situk River Trail; Photo: Haley Johnston

*Trail Description*<sup>6</sup>: "The Situk River trail departs from a parking area associated with the 9-mile bridge on Forest Highway 10 at the Situk River. This trail is primarily used for sport fishing access to the Situk River during spring, summer, and fall months, with opportunities for all 5 species of pacific salmon as well as steelhead, rainbow trout and Dolly Varden. Fishermen have created this "user developed" trail. The U.S. Forest Service is currently planning and implementing improvements along this route which will provide for a better trail and improved access. Generally, the trail follows the Situk River downstream as far as to the bottom end of the ten mile meadow, crosses the Old Situk River and continues to the Middle Situk Cabins. Several spur trails access fishing holes can be found along the way as well as some split log bridges crossing active streams. After hiking approximately 1.5 miles, the

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd514061.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd514061.pdf)



trail veers away from the river and eventually intersects with the Ten Mile ATV Trail. The trail crosses the Old Situk River, as well as a slough on either side of it; depending on season and water levels, waders might be needed to cross this section. After crossing the 2nd slough on the south side of the Old Situk, the trail is generally dry and easy to follow all the way to the airstrip. This section of trail goes through spruce and cottonwood forests and wide meadows, which when in season are full of amazing displays of wildflowers. Many bird species are found along the trail including bald eagles, thrushes, chickadees, wrens, and red-breasted sapsuckers. Along the river expect to see common merganser, spotted sandpiper, Wilson's snipe, lesser and greater yellowleg, Northern waterthrush and belted kingfisher. Roughly ¼ mile above the Middle Situk airstrip is the Confluence Trail, which is 0.6 miles long and ends at the confluence of the Situk and Old Situk rivers. Eagle and Raven cabins are located just off of the gravel airstrip, which is an active airstrip. Another section of trail going downstream for 0.85 miles starts on the airstrip adjacent to the river. There are 4 short trails branching off which access fishing points. The trail is native soil and can be fairly muddy at times; a minimum of knee high boots are suggested. The only improvements are several split log boardwalks that cross streams. "

*Suggestions for maintenance:*

The Situk River trail is a critical access trail for fishing, hunting, foraging and cabin users, used by visiting sportfishermen and residents alike. It should receive top priority for maintenance projects across the District. Special consideration should be taken to design and harden spur trails from the main Situk River trail to the river's edge to provide access and minimize resource damage from user-created trails. Especially as the trail is realigned further from the riverbank, to minimize the threat of erosion, these spur trails will be necessary to keep users on the new trail.



### **Mountain Lake Trail**

*Trail Description:* "The Mountain Lake trail begins at the Situk Lake cabin and follows a stream to the outlet of Mountain Lake. This primitive trail is entirely inside the Russell Fjord Wilderness Area. After passing the cabin the trail meanders through some younger stands of spruce and cottonwood forests. The trail follows the stream corridor most of the way except for a section in the middle where it crosses a 50 foot log bridge over a deep slough. In this area, it veers away from the stream and goes through some muskeg and wet meadows before returning to the edge of the stream. From this point there is a steady but gradual rise in elevation until you reach Mountain Lake. Forested sections of this trail are typically dry; the surface is native soil and well drained along the stream. Sections away from the stream and in the muskeg and meadows get very wet, so boots are recommended year round. The lower section of Mountain Stream Trail offers opportunities for fishing rainbow trout and Dolly Varden most of the summer as well as for sockeye salmon. When the salmon run is present, there are high concentrations of bears. Many of the bird species found in the Situk Lake area can be seen along this trail as well."

*Suggestions for maintenance:* The Mountain Lake trail is the only trail entirely within the Russell Fjord Wilderness Area and offers excellent fishing, hiking, birding and foraging opportunities. It also creates a recreation opportunity for people staying at the Situk Lake Cabin, encouraging longer, more fulfilling visits to the cabin. This trail should be prioritized for maintenance due to its wilderness character, its recreation potential and its proximity to the popular Situk Lake Cabin. Maintenance needs include realignment and hardening of the trail surface *and* improved signage and markers when departing from the Situk Lake Cabin.

### **Russell Fjord Trail**

*Note:* In the Yakutat Ranger District, the word "fjord" often uses the alternative spelling of "fiord". The Russell Fjord Wilderness Area is generally spelled "fjord", but on most signage and in USFS documents, the Russell Fjord Trail and Russell Fiord, the geographic feature, use the "fiord" spelling. For this report, we have chosen to use the spelling as indicated on USFS signage and documents.

*Trail Description:* "The Russell Fjord trail takes off from the end of Forest Road 9955 at the edge of an old logging area. It goes up over a relic moraine at the south end of Russell Fjord and drops down to the beach at sea level. At the top point of the moraine, you enter the Russell Fjord Wilderness Area. The entire trail travels through old growth spruce with the exception of the far end. This end of the trail goes through an area of dead standing trees that were killed off during the Hubbard Glacier closure and subsequent flooding of the fjord in 1986 and 2002. There are several sections of split log boardwalk just before the wilderness boundary, with the trail surface comprised of native soil. Many wet sections exist along the trail, especially toward the end of the trail, which descends the terminal moraine toward the shoreline. This side of the moraine has many fresh water springs and creeks and intercepts many areas of ground water seepage. Boots are recommended on this trail. The primary use on this trail is for sightseeing, wilderness adventure, and photography as well as access for kayakers into Russell Fjord. Walk the beaches to see murrelets, loons, white winged scoters, pigeon guillemots, Aleutian and Arctic terns, phalaropes and jaegers. During the summer months there are fish spawning on the shore near the end of the trail. Russell Fjord is teeming with wildlife including bears, wolves, moose, and wolverines. Kayaking the Fjord is a world class adventure; hiking along the shore at low tide is just as rewarding."



Signage Issues near the Russell Fiord Trail; Photo: Haley Johnston

*Suggestions for maintenance:* The Russell Fiord Trail offers trail users the opportunity to access the incredible wilderness of Russell Fiord without a boat or kayak. As the trail descends, along the fall line, towards the fiord, the trail becomes increasingly wet, muddy and slippery. The trail should be realigned to avoid the groundwater seepage and to make a more gradual descent to the fiord. The Russell Fiord Trail also requires improved signage along Forest Highway 10.



Examples of muddy conditions on the Russell Fiord Trail; Photo: Haley Johnston

## Recommendations for Decommissioning

### ***Vonderheide Trail***

*Trail Description:* "The Vonderheide Trail begins at mile 27 on Forest Highway 10 on the north side of the road. The trail goes through a series of small meadows and mixed spruce and cottonwood forest, enters the Russell Fjord Wilderness, and ends at the base of the Brabazon Mountains near Miller Creek. The first 0.25 mile has had gravel turnpike installed but beyond that there are no other improvements and the tread is all native soil. Much of the lower trail is wet and several sections are flooded by recent beaver activity with some stream crossings, so waterproof boots are recommended. The Vonderheide Trail is unique in that it approaches the base of the mountains near Harlequin Lake, traveling out of the mostly flat "Yakutat Forelands". Beware there are several heavily used game corridors which intersect the trail toward the base of the mountains. For experienced wilderness hikers, it is possible to cross-country hike beyond the end of the trail and into the mountains, but that will require some "bushwhacking". Once you are above tree line, the coastal and mountain views are worth the effort. The Vonderheide Trail is another low use trail and is primarily used for sightseeing, photography, wildlife viewing and occasionally for moose hunting in the fall."



Hikers looking for the Vonderheide "Trail";  
Photo: Haley Johnston

*Recommendation for decommissioning:* For all intents and purposes the Vonderheide Trail is already decommissioned. The trail has not seen maintenance in 5+ years, the trail is not marked in any way where it leaves Forest Highway No 10, and the “trail” itself is nearly unidentifiable. In fact, the only way to identify where the trail is supposed to be is by the regrowth of alders now obscuring the path. The idea of a trail that accesses the mountains, as the Vonderheide Trail is intended to do, is attractive. There are no other trails that access this terrain in the Yakutat Ranger District. However, the challenges of maintaining a trail in wilderness, the limited staff available at the Yakutat Ranger District, the low use of this trail and the immense maintenance needs to bring this trail up to a usable standard, all lead this strategy to recommend the decommissioning of this trail, *unless* capacity at the Yakutat Ranger District is improved.



The Vonderheide Trail obscured by regrowth (left) and a hardened section inundated with water (right);  
Photos: Haley Johnston

## **RECOMMENDED GENERAL APPROACHES**

While this strategy primarily focuses on recommendations of trails to build, maintain or decommission, it is also necessary to highlight other general approaches, policy changes or actions which, if enacted, could lead to a more sustainable trail system. Addressing these recommendations may be necessary before trails are considered for building, maintenance or decommissioning. In other cases, addressing these recommendations can happen concurrently to trail work, but doing so is still critical to achieving a sustainable trail system in the Ranger District. This strategy recommends the following actions for the Yakutat Ranger District:

- Honor the historic and current stewards of the Yakutat area by respecting the government to government relationship between the USFS and the Yakutat-Tlingit Tribe. Regular consultation with the community and tribe will be necessary to determine priorities and projects that will be beneficial to and supported by the community.
- Increase staffing levels at the Yakutat Ranger District. Few, if any, of the recommendations in this strategy can be achieved with the current staffing levels. Yakutat Ranger District staff are burdened with an amount of work that is simply too great for the team to which it is assigned.
- Work with the community to fill gaps in Ranger District capacity with private contractors. If the community was more aware of the potential for lucrative, meaningful work providing services such as trail building, design, materials sourcing and labor to the USFS on a contract basis, more community members may be inclined to start and/or operate businesses and acquire the necessary machinery and/or tools to complete the available work.
- Work with the Forest leadership to find a solution to the non-mechanized policy in the Russell Fjord Wilderness Area. Many of the trails that leave the Yakutat road system and pass into this wilderness area are dilapidated, in need of repair and impeded by blowdowns. While chainsaw use does not make sense in all wilderness areas due to distance from trailheads, the cost of transportation, the weight of transporting fuel and the challenges of fuel storage in the field, these issues do not apply to the trails in the Russell Fjord Wilderness area. An MRA should be crafted to allow for chainsaw use on the Mountain Lake, Situk Lake, Russell Fjord, Harlequin Lake and (if not decommissioned) Vonderheide trails.
- Conduct analysis of the current outfitter/guide rates and fees for guiding sport fisherman on Yakutat Ranger District trails to consider if rates should be increased to help mitigate the significant maintenance required on the District's high-use trails.