



Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy

Prepared by: Alaska Trails

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	3
PROJECT BACKGROUND	4
Starting Point: National USFS Policy	4
Definition of Sustainability	4
Why are sustainable trails important?	4
GOALS	5
PROCESS	5
Community Inclusion	5
Tools For Outreach	7
Challenges and Limitations	7
REPORT STRUCTURE	8
NEXT STEPS	8

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy (TSTS) would not have been possible without the help and input of many generous partners across Southeast Alaska.

United States Forest Service (USFS) employees ranging from Seasonal Technicians to District Rangers generously offered their time and expertise to this project. Additionally, partners with cities, communities, native corporations, tribal offices, tourism operators and nonprofits helped to expand our knowledge of the Tongass, its trails and its communities.

Finally, to the many individuals who participated in this process through emails, virtual meetings, online surveys, in-person meetings, listening sessions and dozens of informal conversations at trailheads, in grocery stores and along the trails, thank you for participating. Your dedication to your communities, the Tongass and these trails is a testament to the impressive civic engagement of Southeast and the cultural, spiritual, economic and community value of the Tongass.

While there are too many names to mention, Alaska Trails would like to extend special thanks to:

Sharon Seim, USFS
John Suomala, USFS
Teresa Swanson, USFS (formerly) Yakutat Ranger District
Mike Downs, USFS Hoonah Ranger District
Geno Cisneros, USFS Hoonah Ranger District
Victoria Houser, USFS Wrangell Ranger District
Denise Wolvin, USFS Ketchikan Ranger District
Ben Hughey, Executive Director, Sitka Trail Works
Lynne Brandon, Sitka Trail Works
Kate Thomas, City and Borough of Wrangell
Ian Johnson, Hoonah
Ryan O'Shaughnessy, Trail Mix
Carolyn Auwaerter, Trail Mix
Chris Beck, Alaska Trails retired
Katie Rooks, Prince of Wales Excursion Outfitter
Lee Hart, Alaska Outdoor Alliance

INTRODUCTION

At the direction of the USFS, Alaska Trails¹ 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 serves as an introduction to the subsequent Forest-wide and individual Ranger District Chapters.

Within this chapter is a discussion of the background of the project, including the national initiatives that spurred the creation of this strategy. This chapter also includes the goals that guided this work, the process that Alaska Trails followed in the creation of the strategy, an explanation of the report's structure and next steps to help create and sustain a sustainable trail system for the Tongass National Forest.

For the purposes of this project, a sustainable trail system is defined as ***socially relevant and supported, ecologically resilient, and economically viable***.

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 Tongass National Forest's trail system, these recommendations will need to be considered and, where deemed appropriate, implemented.

¹ www.alaska-trails.org

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Starting Point: National USFS Policy

The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy project builds from two national U.S. Forest Service (USFS) policy documents: “National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System”² and the related “10-Year Trail Challenge – 2020 to 2030”³. As the National Strategy explains, “Sustainability is achieved at the junction where trails are socially relevant and supported, ecologically resilient, and economically viable.”

Why are sustainable trails important?

Trails help visitors and residents access National Forest System lands for recreation, hunting, fishing, subsistence use and commercial enterprises. They offer physical health, mental health and economic benefits to nearby communities. Nationally, and in Alaska, use of trails has grown in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the growth rate of outdoor recreation generally and trail use specifically. Trails are wanted and needed in the Tongass National Forest.

Sustainable trails are important because they help to reduce the burden of maintenance for the USFS and partners and are less likely to need reconstruction. This strategy requires that to be considered sustainable, a trail must have community support, which means a broader potential pool of resources for its maintenance. Unsustainable trails, by contrast, become burdens to land managers and partners, fall into disrepair because the cost to maintain them is too great and are unlikely to have community champions or advocates.

Looking Forward

This strategy looks 10-20 years in the future. We recognize that it may take several decades to implement the recommendations outlined in the following chapters. The Tongass National Forest’s existing system of trails was built over many decades during which the economic reality of the forest was different than today. This strategy acknowledges the constraints of increasing costs, unstable funding and reduced workforce across the forest. While recent hiring and funding opportunities are exciting developments, a multi-decade approach to building a sustainable trail system requires the consideration that funding and workforce may again be reduced in the future. Adaptability and partnership with local organizations will be of paramount importance to see the goals and recommendations of this strategy realized.

² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/national-strategy>

³ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/10YTC>

GOALS

The ultimate goal of the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy (TSTS) was to offer recommendations to create ***a more sustainable trail system*** within the boundaries of the Tongass National Forest.

However, several additional objectives were identified which will help achieve this broader goal.

These specific goals include:

1. Complete an inventory of the existing USFS trails
2. Present existing data (if any) on trail use and trends for each Ranger District and Forest-wide
3. Identify existing and potential key partners across the Tongass
4. Facilitate stakeholder conversations to identify community and user group goals for Ranger District trail systems
5. Recommend trails to build, maintain or decommission for each Ranger District
6. Offer general approaches, policy changes or actions which could lead to a more sustainable trail system for each Ranger District and Forest-wide

PROCESS

The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy followed a two-phase process. Phase one (late 2020) included a period of research and coordination with Tongass National Forest Ranger Districts to build an inventory of existing trails. During this phase, Alaska Trails also collaborated with Forest and Regional staff to identify a representative subset of communities for work during phase two.

In phase two (2021), Alaska Trails researched background information, trail issues and opportunities for partnership on a Forest-wide and Ranger District level. Alaska Trails staff met with Ranger District Staff, conducted virtual and in person community outreach and visited each of the phase two communities to facilitate community discussions and ground truth trail conditions. By the end of 2021 a draft Forest-wide chapter was complete, in addition to draft chapters for Hoonah, Prince of Wales, Sitka and Petersburg Ranger Districts.

More funding became available, allowing Alaska Trails to extend their work into 2022. The extended timeframe allowed the TSTS to include the communities of Yakutat, Wrangell and Ketchikan, and for the Alaska Trails team to produce deeper, more meaningful work in the Forest-wide chapter. Additional outreach to the initial subset of communities and editing of the final Ranger District chapters also occurred.

Community Inclusion

The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy followed a community-focused approach, meaning that for each Ranger District Chapter, a single community was highlighted. Exceptions include the Prince of Wales Chapter, which focused on multiple communities and the Hoonah Ranger District Chapter, which included limited but meaningful engagement with the community of Pelican in addition to the highlighted community of Hoonah.

While Alaska Trails would have liked to work with all of the communities in each Ranger District, community engagement on that scale was incompatible with the scope, timeline and budget of the TSTS. Other Tongass communities would benefit from trail planning if future USFS or partner funding becomes available to pursue a similar process in additional communities.

The communities selected included Yakutat, Hoonah, Sitka, Craig, Coffman Cove, Kake, Wrangell and Ketchikan. These communities were included in the TSTS based on the following criteria:

- The overall collection of communities provided a reasonable representation of the diversity of communities across the Tongass
- Ranger District Staff and partner organizations were willing to engage in work with Alaska Trails and the identified communities.

There are varying levels of depth, detail and scope across the individual Ranger District chapters. Factors that may have affected the depth and scope of work in each community include:

- Previous or concurrent trail planning work
- Ability, interest and/or capacity of communities, local governments, tribal entities and other partners to work collaboratively with Alaska Trails on the TSTS
- Scheduling compatibility between local USFS staff, Alaska Trails staff and representatives of communities, local governments, tribal entities and other partners
- Community size and composition

The community of Juneau and Juneau Ranger District were selected for the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy. The hope was that the TSTS would occur concurrently with the planned Juneau Community Trails Plan - a multijurisdictional effort to coordinate and prioritize trail projects across multiple land manager jurisdictions. However, the Juneau Community Trails Plan was delayed, leading the TSTS team to defer work in Juneau because meaningful community engagement in a community the size of Juneau would have been difficult without partner collaboration and because Alaska Trails did not want to ask the community to participate in two duplicative outreach processes. Juneau could benefit from TSTS style work in the future and the USFS should collaborate with local partners on the Juneau Community Trails Plan.

The community of Angoon and Admiralty National Monument were also selected for the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy. Difficulties with virtual communication, Covid-19 outbreaks within the community, scheduling challenges, prioritization of other community needs and a need for greater relationship building before meaningful trail consultation could occur led the TSTS to defer work in Angoon. Angoon could benefit from TSTS style work in the future and could be an excellent location to explore co-management or co-stewardship, if the community supported such models.

Tools For Outreach

Alaska Trails utilized many mechanisms for outreach to USFS stakeholders. These included:

- Information published on the Alaska Trails website
- Presentations and outreach at Alaska Trails' Land Manager Forum and Trails Conference
- Initial informative meetings with Ranger District Staff
- One-on-one meetings with stakeholders
- Direct outreach via email or phone to known or potential USFS partners
- Meetings with known or potential USFS partners
- Online surveys
- Virtual meetings with permitted outfitter/guides
- Virtual and in-person community meetings
- On-the-ground, personalized outreach in communities, on trails and at trailheads
- Follow-up meetings and review with Ranger District Staff

Challenges and Limitations

While the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy has produced meaningful outcomes, certain challenges and limitations were inherent to the process and limited the scope and depth of the work produced. First and foremost, TSTS work and community outreach occurred during 2021 and 2022. While the initial severity of the Covid-19 pandemic had declined by this point, in some cases, local Covid considerations and outbreaks limited Alaska Trails staff's ability to visit communities and meet with individuals.

In addition, small communities in Alaska have varying degrees of internet connectivity. Since much of the outreach for the TSTS was necessarily virtual and remote, some communities and community members participation was limited by online formats of meetings and feedback. In person visits were made to each community and efforts were made to offer community members opportunities for in person feedback.

In many communities in Alaska, meaningful community engagement is dependent on mutual respect, long-term relationship building and trust. The timeline of the project, the geographic scope of the Tongass and the fact that Alaska Trails staff came from outside communities were all limiting factors. Other challenges and limitations included outreach occurring during hunting, fishing and/or tourism seasons, community confusion over land manager jurisdiction, community prioritization of more basic needs over trails and trails planning, long-term community and individual opinions of the federal government and USFS, turnover in key USFS positions during the TSTS process and scheduling incompatibility between Alaska Trails staff and key partners.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy (TSTS) is divided into an Introduction, a Forest-wide Chapter and individual Ranger District Chapters. There are Chapters for each Ranger District except for the Juneau Ranger District and Admiralty National Monument. For more information on how and why Ranger Districts were or were not included in the TSTS, see the Process section of this chapter. Note that in the TSTS, the Craig and Thorne Bay Ranger Districts are treated as a single Prince of Wales Ranger District due to the USFS's intention to combine these two Ranger Districts.

NEXT STEPS

This project has resulted in greater understanding of the needs and interests of residents, communities, and the outdoor recreation industry, and it will enable the USFS and the collective trail community to better position resources in support of desired use opportunities, access needs, and trail systems.

For the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy to be a useful document, Alaska Trails recommends the following:

- Forest-level staff and leadership review the Forest-wide chapter and take meaningful action to address the structural and institutional recommendations for "Forest-wide General Approaches"
- Individual Ranger District staff and leadership review the Forest-wide chapter and their Ranger District chapter
- Consult the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy when Ranger Districts prioritize their annual and long term trail maintenance, planning and construction
- District Rangers and staff continue to dialogue and build relationships with the partners and community members that contributed to their District's chapter
- The trails recommended for decommissioning (if any) in each Ranger District chapter are decommissioned to reduce the burden of maintenance for each Ranger District
- The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy is shared with regional, Forest-level and Ranger District partners
- The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy is used as a fundraising tool by partners to demonstrate community support for trail maintenance and construction
- The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy is treated as a living document that will evolve over time as issues are addressed and trail projects are completed