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The Great Land Turns 50:

Alaska's conservation history one of success, tragedy, determination... and a powerful vision for the future

By Sarah DeWeerdt

Alaska—an amazing story, and a remarkable place. Fifty years ago, some saw it as a remote, inhospitable place, cold and dark, and wondered why on Earth the federal government had decided to grant it statehood. Others, however, gazed with awe at its amazing stretches of tundra, mountains, and rich watersheds. They absorbed the reality of its breathtaking wildlife, and its phenomenal biological and cultural diversity, and saw much more. They saw a fantastic, unspoiled array of nature's power and beauty—**and with it, the opportunity to experience, embrace, and share its significance.**

As Alaska celebrates its 50th anniversary as a state, we are compelled to consider its place as an important and unique segment of our country, as well as the critical events, efforts, and organizations that brought the conservation community—and Alaska's wilderness—to where it is today.

Without a doubt, the most significant moment in the last 50 years of conservation in Alaska was the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, which created 10 new national parks in Alaska, expanded three others, and protected many of the state's most pristine and spectacular ecosystems. Many consider it the most crucial piece of conservation legislation ever enacted.

The Castle H-Bomb, similar to five that were proposed for detonation in Alaska under Project Chariot in 1958 © *Photo courtesy of National Nuclear Administration/Nevada Site Office*

In 1958, the US Atomic Energy Commission initiated Project Chariot, a scheme to create an artificial harbor on Alaska's North Slope, near the Inupiat village of Point Hope, by detonating a chain of five hydrogen bombs.

But the history of conservation in Alaska goes back much further than that.

Atomic Bombs, Colossal Dams, and Bad Ideas

In the early decades after Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867, the impetus for conservation came from visitors. The fur seal, for example, might have gone extinct if not for the paintings and advocacy of American artist Henry Wood Elliott. Charles Sheldon, a leader in a national sportsmen's group, was behind the creation of Denali (originally Mt. McKinley) National Park in 1917. A national monument (now a national park) was established on the Katmai Peninsula in 1918 thanks in part to Robert F. Griggs, a botany professor from Ohio.

A movement of Alaska residents in support of conservation began to emerge around the time of statehood. In 1958, the US Atomic Energy Commission initiated Project Chariot, a scheme to create an artificial harbor on Alaska's North Slope, near the Inupiat village of Point Hope, by detonating a chain of five hydrogen bombs. At first, the proposal garnered enthusiastic support from many Alaskans, who were eager to bring economic development to their new state—**at any cost.**

But two scientists from the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, William Pruitt and Leslie Viereck, raised concerns about the

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ACF Working for Alaska's Future
No Substitute for Expertise

ACF is proud of the expertise of our program team—more than 60 years of Alaska conservation experience. Deputy Director Ann Rothe is a veteran of 23 years of conservation work in Alaska. She focuses on ACF's strategic direction and program work on mining, and is a key representative to major donors and foundations.

Our newest Program Officer, Polly Carr, spent the last 10 years directing Alaska Youth for Environmental Action. She will support and advocate for ACF grantees, work to enhance leadership and effectiveness in the conservation community, and increase support for Native-led sustainability efforts.

Brian McNitt, our program officer for Southeast Alaska, began his Alaska conservation career in 1984 and has been working at ACF since 1999. Matt Rafferty, our program officer for energy, has extensive experience with coal and climate change issues, and has been with ACF since 2005.

Visit our website at www.akcf.org and learn more about their backgrounds.

environmental and human health impacts of the project. They paid for their principled stand with their jobs, but opposition to Project Chariot gained momentum, and attracted individuals who would become leaders of the Alaska conservation community, including Alaska Conservation Foundation founders Celia Hunter, Denny Wilcher, and Ginny Wood. In 1960, the three founded the Alaska Conservation Society, the first statewide conservation organization, composed of volunteer chapters. As questions mounted about the economic viability and safety of the project, the federal government quietly shelved it in the early 1960s.

Prudhoe Bay oil rig "State #1," 1968
© US Fish & Wildlife Service

Many of the same people also helped fight the proposed Rampart Dam on the Yukon River, which would have been, at the time, the world's largest hydroelectric project. The dam would have created a lake stretching nearly to the Canadian border and inundating Native villages, individual homesteads, and vast stretches of habitat for waterfowl, large mammal herds, and other wildlife. Conservation and citizens' groups within the state rallied together to stop the project.

These two failed megaprojects were key "instigating activities that brought people together and built a grassroots conservation movement" in Alaska, says Peg Tileston, co-founder of both ACF and Trustees for Alaska, who has been involved in the conservation community since 1972.

Celia Hunter, Mardy Murie, Denny Wilcher, & Ginny Wood, 1985 © *ACF archives*

Staking Claims Across the State

Another galvanizing event was the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968. Oil companies were eager to begin developing the North Slope oil deposits, and wanted to build a pipeline across the state to Valdez, the nearest ice-free port, to ship their oil to market. That spurred the resolution of the land claims of Alaska Natives, explains Vernita Herdman, an Inupiaq and ACF board member who has spent decades working for tribal advocacy organizations on hunting, fishing, and other Native rights issues. "Some of the oil was under lands that had never been adjudicated," says Herdman. "The same was true of some of the lands that the pipeline would run across."

The result was the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), passed in 1971. The law set up 13 for-profit regional Native Corporations, provided them with $962 million in seed money, and gave them the right to select 44 million acres of federal land for their economic development.

The law also contained a provision, section 17(d)(2), which would set aside 80 million acres of federal conservation lands. Through

Cover, top photo: Eagle Peak © *Matt Rafferty*

the early 1970s, Tileston recalls, members of the Alaska conservation community, academic scientists, and personnel from land management agencies became part of a "Maps on the Floor Gang" who worked to identify the most important lands for protection.

But legislation to protect the "d-2 lands" proved controversial. The crux of the issue was **access** to conservation areas. Some proposed protected areas would surround existing homesteads, creating private "inholdings." Many of the lands slated for protection were traditional hunting and fishing areas for Alaska Natives, who had been promised subsistence rights under ANCSA. And many non-Native Alaskans also depended on hunting and fishing to feed their families.

The legislation went through numerous versions. Finally, after the November 1980 election, when Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter for the presidency and Republicans gained control of Congress, conservation advocates realized that the bill would soon face a much tougher political climate. The final version of ANILCA was rushed through Congress and signed by President Carter on December 2.

ANILCA was a sweeping piece of legislation, granting protections to 100 million acres of federal lands in Alaska, including national parks, preserves, refuges, monuments, wilderness, and rivers. The bill also doubled the size of the US National Park and Refuge System and tripled the total acreage of federally designated Wilderness. Jim Stratton of the National Parks Conservation Association (and former ACF Vice President and Program and Finance Director) says that ANILCA had a "profound effect" on the nation's system of conservation areas, protecting large, intact, functioning wilderness ecosystems that are rare elsewhere in the country.

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The Rise of a Movement

The Alaska conservation community grew up during the struggle to pass ANILCA, becoming larger, more sophisticated, and more coordinated. **The formation of the Alaska Conservation Foundation (ACF) in 1980 (as successor to the Alaska Conservation Society) was one indicator of the movement's maturation.**

ACF's role was to provide financial support for conservation in Alaska, engaging donors in the Lower 48 and making grants to small, grassroots groups working on local conservation issues around the state. ACF also provided training in fundraising and nonprofit management, and sponsored the Alaska Conservation Assembly to bring together representatives of organizations all over the state to coordinate goals and action plans, helping the state's conservation

ACF Working for Alaska's Future

The Tongass: Preserving Forests While Building Allies

Throughout 50 years of conservation history in Alaska, one of the most compelling and long-standing issues has been permanent protection of the Tongass National Forest—the world's largest remaining temperate rainforest.

Since its founding, Alaska Conservation Foundation has provided support to effective local conservation organizations like Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, the Sitka Conservation Society, and Lynn Canal Conservation to organize members to advocate on behalf of the Tongass.

More recently, ACF has also provided leadership through its partnership with seven other conservation organizations working together as the Tongass Conservation Collaborative (TCC). The goals of the TCC are to gain permanent protection for the lands most important for salmon, wildlife, and sustainable use by local communities; transition the timber industry from logging old-growth to a sustainable young-growth timber supply as soon as possible; support a restoration industry that improves salmon and wildlife habitat and provides jobs; and promote a positive conservation ethic that is supported by a majority of the region's people.

When we look back after another 50 years, 2008 may prove to be a turning point. Through the work of TCC members developing relationships with representatives from local sawmills, Sealaska Corporation, the State Forester, and commercial fishing organizations, there has been significant progress toward consensus on a legislative package to resolve most of the conflicts over land allocation within the Tongass.

In December 2008, a small working group of the TCC presented a concept proposal to the Tongass Futures Roundtable (www.tongassfutures.net) that would provide such a resolution by giving a level of certainty to conservation interests, sawmills, Sealaska (the Regional Native Corporation for Southeast Alaska), and the region's communities. Several aspects of the proposal are innovative and controversial, but the TCC is working to refine the concepts and promote greater understanding and acceptance of this unprecedented solutions-based proposal.

This year, the TCC will continue improving the proposal, build broad support within the region for the package, and work the proposal into draft federal legislation by summer. The TCC hopes to have the legislation introduced in Congress by the end of 2009—a bold goal with a potential huge conservation gain: the concept proposal contains over 7 million acres of new conservation designations for the Tongass!

community become more professional, politically savvy, and effective.

The newly strengthened community had plenty to do. "Since ANILCA there has been a constant battle to protect the gains of the past," says ACF Executive Director Nick Hardigg. "We've been repeatedly reminded that we can't be complacent."

One task was to ensure that ANILCA regulations and management plans fulfilled the promise of protection for Alaska's wilderness. By the same token, there were some important areas that ANILCA left out, or protected incompletely or impermanently.

No Refuge from Controversy

Probably the most iconic example of such a place is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the nation's largest conservation units and the most ecologically diverse protected area in the Arctic, encompassing habitats from the wetlands and barrier islands along the coastline of the Beaufort Sea in the north to the boreal forest south of the Brooks Range.

ANILCA enlarged the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to 19.5 million acres and designated 8 million acres of the refuge as federal wilderness. But it left unresolved the status of about 1.5 million acres of the coastal plain, known as the "1002 Area" after the section of the law that addressed it. ANILCA stated that oil development would be permitted in the 1002 Area, but only with Congressional approval, and called for a review of the coastal plain's wildlife resources and its oil and gas potential.

The coastal plain, a broad expanse of wetlands and tundra vegetation underlain by permafrost, provides important denning habitat for polar bears, a summer spot for diverse species of migratory birds, and the calving ground for the massive 123,000-strong Porcupine caribou herd.

The 10.8 million gallons of crude oil spilled from the ship eventually covered 11,000 square miles of ocean and fouled 1,300 miles of shoreline.

Kodiak protest after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, May 1989 © *Aleda Yourdon*

The 1002 Area also contains an estimated 7.7 billion barrels of oil, according to the US Geological Survey. If oil development were to occur in the Refuge, however, it would take 15 years for any oil to get to market, and **even at peak production it would be just a trickle in the overall global market,** reducing gasoline prices by only a few cents per gallon at the pump.

Despite these statistics, since the mid-1980s there have been many attempts to pass legislation to enable drilling. So far the conservation community and the Gwich'in people, for whom the Porcupine Caribou Herd is the foundation of their subsistence, have fended them off. The Alaska Coalition, a network of grassroots organizations coordinated and funded by ACF from 2000 to 2007, was also instrumental in battles to keep the Refuge protected.

Perhaps the closest the Arctic Refuge ever came to being opened for oil development was in the early months of 1989. A bill was moving rapidly through the Senate, and President George H. W. Bush was expected to sign it. Then, shortly after midnight on March 24, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound.

The Unthinkable Happens

"The minute the *Exxon Valdez* hit the rocks, the chances of that bill passing went to zero," recalls Stan Senner, who has been involved in the Alaska conservation movement since the early 1970s and is now the head of Audubon Alaska.

The 10.8 million gallons of crude oil spilled from the ship eventually covered 11,000 square miles of ocean and fouled 1,300 miles of shoreline. "This was one of the most significant environmental events in the history of the country, if not the world," says Senner, who spent seven years working on the spill's aftermath for both the state of Alaska and the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council.

The remote location of the spill and the area's craggy coastline made cleanup difficult, and the pristine, highly productive nature of the marine ecosystem only increased the impact. At least a quarter-million seabirds perished in the immediate aftermath, along with sea otters, harbor seals, bald eagles, orcas, and other marine species.

Today, the spill's effects are still being felt. The Sound's vital herring industry has never recovered. Research suggests that long-term, low-level exposure to oil that remains in the environment

continues to harm sea otters, harlequin ducks, and various intertidal species in Prince William Sound.

"The big thing that came out of the spill was a real sense of vigilance on the part of the public," says ACF Deputy Director Ann Rothe. State and federal laws were passed to improve shipping safety. Within 10 days of the spill ACF established two funds to help with the response. The Prince William Sound Clean-up and Rehabilitation Fund, a donor-advised fund, made grants to help coordinate rescue and rehabilitation of birds and mammals, as well as education, cleanup, research and analysis. The Fund for Oil and America's Future was designed to support advocacy groups influencing how and where oil companies do business in Alaska.

Bob Shavelson, head of the water-quality watchdog group Cook Inletkeeper, says, "We were concerned about rapid ecological changes, largely related to the oil and gas industry. Lots of that concern was spurred by seeing what happened with the *Exxon Valdez*."

Alaska's Rainforests: Longtime Battlegrounds

In southeast Alaska, conservation efforts have long focused on the Tongass National Forest, the nation's largest national forest at nearly 17 million acres and the world's most significant remnant of old-growth temperate rainforest. It is home to teeming salmon streams, grizzly bears, and a healthy population of bald eagles, among other wildlife.

ANILCA protected 5.4 million acres of the forest as federally designated Wilderness. But it also set high targets for timber harvest—"essentially a blank check from Congress to remove 450 million board feet a year," as Jim Stratton puts it—and created a permanent $40 million annual appropriation to support the timber industry.

A major victory came with the passage of the Tongass Timber Reform Act in 1990. Propelled by ACF and its grantees Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and Alaska Center for the Environment, the law repealed the harvest target set by ANILCA, provided wilderness protection for over one million acres of forest, and mandated buffer strips on salmon and resident fish streams.

Yet the Tongass has continued to be a locus of controversy. In 1997, the Tongass Land Management Plan again raised the maximum logging levels in the forest.

Sun-striped woods, Lost Coast, Tongass National Forest © *Erin McKittrick, Ground Truth Trekking*

Conservation groups challenged the Plan in court, arguing that the logging targets were still too high, and in 2005 the 9th Circuit Court ordered the US Forest Service to re-do the plan.

In the meantime, in early 2001, ACF and the Alaska Rainforest Campaign it helped fund and coordinate were instrumental in convincing President Clinton to approve the "Roadless Rule," which banned road building and logging in undeveloped areas of the Tongass. Just a few months later, however, the incoming Bush administration exempted the Tongass from Roadless Rule protections. Governmental maneuvering and legal confrontations have continued to keep the forest in jeopardy.

To help resolve management controversies, ACF has been a major supporter and fiscal sponsor of the Tongass Conservation Collaborative, an unusual alliance including mill owners and Native Corporations who are working with the US Forest Service and conservation groups to find a long-term, sustainable solution. ACF advocates permanent protection for the most ecologically important remaining

ACF Working for Alaska's Future:

Keeping Our Oceans Clean, Safe, and Healthy

Alaska's oceans are under serious threat. The impacts of global warming are altering the distribution of marine fish, and have threatened the survival of seabirds and marine mammals. Scientific evidence indicates that there will be a significant decline in ecosystem productivity in Alaska's oceans over the next 30 years, and industrial development will hasten this decline. This lends urgency to our work and that of our marine grantees, which is focused on marine fisheries, offshore oil and gas development, marine shipping, and ocean contaminants.

ACF supports the Alaska Marine Conservation Council's work to stop offshore oil and gas oil development and their efforts to secure protection for essential fish habitats, including cold-water coral gardens along the Aleutian trench.

ACF funded the initial meetings of the Bering Sea Elders Advisory Group, Alaska Native elders from 22 villages on the Bering coast working to limit the expansion of the trawl fleet and its impacts on subsistence resources. We presently support a research project initiated by the Elders to gather information about regional subsistence activities, the beginning of a three-year study of subsistence uses of marine resources.

Alaska wind turbines
© *Damion Brook Kintz*

areas of the forest; logging could proceed in younger stands and areas where roads already exist.

Grassroots Efforts to Stop the Global Rush for Alaska's Resources

ACF's Nick Hardigg points out that as the global economy continues to grow and rapidly developing nations such as India and China strive to increase their standard of living, the pressure to develop Alaska's timber, energy, and mineral resources is steadily mounting.

"In the past, many conservation efforts in Alaska were built around iconic places," Hardigg says. **Current threats are more dispersed around the state, but far larger and potentially damaging, involving lesser-known lands that garner little media attention.**

As a result, ACF's role in building grassroots support for conservation is "more important than ever before," Hardigg says. "We need to build support within Alaska for its own long-term protection. We need to get local voices empowered, organized, and active about these threats." The foundation is the largest single supporter of Alaska's conservation community, providing much of the essential operating support that keeps the groups alive.

As fiscal sponsor of the Alaska Coal Working Group, ACF is working to prevent the development of coal mines and the building of coal-fired power plants in Alaska. That's especially significant because the state has half of all US coal reserves, and one-eighth of global reserves. The Western Arctic deposit alone is one of the largest in the world, containing an estimated 4 trillion tons of coal.

Burning coal is extremely destructive environmentally—it results in the release of heavy metals like mercury into the atmosphere, and twice the level of greenhouse gas emissions as other fossil fuels. Mining coal is equally destructive.

"We believe in not just saying 'no,' but in providing an alternative vision that can build support for conservation in Alaska," Hardigg adds. ACF is working with the Renewable Energy Alaska Project (REAP) and the Alaska Clean Energy Campaign to promote energy efficiency and the development of renewable energy resources in Alaska such as wave, tidal, wind, and geothermal power.

"Alaska has a wealth of renewable energy resources and remote villages that act as a proving ground and laboratory for renewable energy technologies," says Hannah Manser, a former ACF Intern who is now assistant director of REAP. Manser sees the shift to renewable energy as a key task for the younger generation of conservationists. "From manufacturing, to installa-

ACF Working for Alaska's Future:
Coal, Energy, and Creating Progressive Strategies

Alaska holds an unparalleled wealth of both coal and renewable energy sources. We have half the nation's coal reserves, as well as incredible reserves of wind, geothermal energy, tidal power, wave power, and other potential sources of clean energy. Alaska could become the center for research and development of clean energy sources, setting an example of renewable energy utilization for the rest of the country. Coal, on the other hand, is very toxic and polluting, involving highly destructive extraction methods—and it is increasingly perceived across the globe as the cheap, abundant energy source.

ACF works with 25 conservation and tribal organizations as coordinator of the Alaska Coal Working Group, whose goal is to keep Alaska's coal in the ground. The priority projects are to stop a proposed coal mine near the Chuitna River and a Fairbanks coal-to-liquids facility, and to change the makeup of utility boards to bodies that oppose coal and promote renewable energy.

ACF also supports the Clean Energy Campaign. This critical effort is working to address the threat of climate change and transition Alaska away from fossil fuel production, toward solutions of renewable energy and a sustainable economic and environmental future.

ACF's Strategies for Alaska's Future effort is helping direct the conservation-related work of the Alaska Legislature toward positive outcomes. It brings the conservation community together to identify shared priorities, thwart destructive bills, and pass progressive legislation. ACF believes that speaking with a unified voice strengthens the movement and helps broaden the base of support for conservation in Alaska.

Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and the state legislature have indicated that the full session begun in January 2009 will focus on long-term energy relief. She has called for an ambitious statewide goal of producing half of Alaska's electricity from renewable sources by 2025. For the first time, the priorities of the Alaska Legislature and the conservation community seem to be going hand in hand.

ACF Working for Alaska's Future:
Deflecting the Rising Heat of Climate Change

For the Alaska Conservation Foundation and its grantees, climate change is very real and very threatening. In Alaska's Arctic environment, we confront the impacts of global warming on a daily basis. In addition to rising temperatures, the polar ice cap has receded by more than 20 percent in the last three years. The area covered by permafrost has receded by nearly 10 percent in the last century.

These changes—as well as alterations in annual precipitation, rising sea levels, greater frequency and intensity of storms along the Arctic coastline, and changes in distribution and abundance of fish and wildlife—have had profound impacts on Alaska Arctic's ecosystems, and on the livelihoods and ways of life of Arctic Indigenous Peoples. The world's polar region is in a state of crisis, a situation that lends tremendous importance and urgency to the work of our grantees engaged in Arctic issues and the need for our support of their efforts.

ACF belongs to an alliance of foundations that support the work of non-governmental organizations in the eight nations of the circumpolar Arctic. ACF and these Arctic funders work with grantees on a broad-based campaign to protect the resilience of the environment to adapt to climate change by limiting environmental stresses caused by human activities.

tions, to operations and maintenance, renewable energy technologies will create an abundance of opportunities for today's and future generations," she says.

ACF's Strategies for Alaska's Future project is another example of the foundation's grassroots focus. It is a team effort designed to help Alaska's grassroots voices speak in unison and to focus on key legislation, swing votes in the legislature, and creating progressive change.

Polar bears, Cape Lisburne © *Gerry Atwell, US Fish & Wildlife Service*

During the last legislative session, the Strategies team was instrumental in passing over $685 million in energy legislation. This included the creation of a $250 million renewable energy fund and $300 million for energy efficiency and home weatherization across the state—which were increased by a respective $50 and $60 million during a special session on energy.

Climate Change Heats Up

Because of the size of Alaska's coal reserves and the heavy climate impact of coal combustion, ACF's work on coal and energy is also addressing the threat of climate change. Since Alaska became a state, annual average temperatures have increased by 4º Fahrenheit, compared to a 1º Fahrenheit increase in global average temperature. **In other words, Alaska is heating up four times faster than the rest of the world.**

In the Arctic, a few degrees can mean fundamental change to the environment, such as the melting of permafrost and vast areas of sea ice. Those changes are having devastating impacts on Arctic wildlife, such as the polar bear, recently listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

ACF is also working proactively to identify and address other development threats that may arise as the polar ice cap recedes, such as the opening of new shipping lanes, expansion of industrial fisheries, and new areas for offshore oil and gas development.

Statewide Mining and Drilling Boom

Like coal mining, hard-rock mining often involves the wholesale dismantling of ecosystems, as land is stripped away to get at the ore beneath the surface. "It dwarfs the impacts from oil development," says ACF's Ann Rothe. **"What mining does to a terrestrial landscape—it's like an atom bomb."**

The toxic chemicals used in industrial processing of ore can also cause long-term, far-reaching damage to air and water quality. Up to 40 new hard-rock mines are currently under exploration or development in Alaska. The current financial crisis has stalled plans for many of these proposed mines, but this is likely to be temporary.

ACF supports Alaskans for Responsible Mining as they advocate for rigorous state regulations to limit the environmental consequences of mine development. Recently, much attention has centered on the proposed Pebble Mine, a gold, molybdenum, and copper deposit near the headwaters of Bristol Bay, which supports the world's

largest sockeye salmon fishery. Rothe calls the coalition of groups opposing the mine (the Bristol Bay Coalition, of which ACF is fiscal sponsor) "astonishing in its breadth"—commercial salmon fishers, sport fishing groups and fishing lodge owners, Alaska Native groups, and environmental organizations.

While much conservation community attention to oil and gas development in Alaska has focused on the Arctic Refuge, there are additional areas that are just as ecologically important, and equally threatened—again, like Bristol Bay.

In 2007, Congress and the Bush Administration lifted a 20-year moratorium on offshore drilling in Bristol Bay. Not only would drilling in this area threaten the vital sockeye salmon fishery, but additional development onshore, around Izembek and Nelson Lagoons, would disrupt vital nesting and staging habitat for world-class populations of migratory waterfowl.

"We would be foolish not to make use of this moment to permanently protect some of Alaska's greatest treasures. That is what we are working to do. It is what ACF is all about."

~Nick Hardigg

Caribou in Aniakchak Caldera, near south shore of Bristol Bay © *Troy Hamon, National Park Service*

Teshekpuk Lake, situated on the western end of Alaska's North Slope, is the center of a vast chain of wetlands that supports tens of thousands of geese, spectacled and Steller's eiders, yellow-billed loons, and caribou. It's another place that lacks permanent protection and will undoubtedly face renewed pressure for oil and gas development. ACF's Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska program is effectively rallying hunting and fishing enthusiasts and businesses from around the country to help protect the lake, and recently helped secure a 10-year moratorium on oil and gas development in the region from the Department of the Interior.

North—to the Future

The Alaska Purchase was initially referred to as "Seward's Folly," after the US Secretary of State who paid the astronomical sum of $7.2 million for what was then assumed to be a massive frozen wasteland. At the time, no one could have predicted the enormous bounty of its natural resources, nor its immeasurable contribution to the nation's wilderness heritage.

ACF's Nick Hardigg sees a parallel in Alaska's position today. Just as Americans of Seward's time could scarcely imagine how valuable Alaska would become, Hardigg argues, today we can scarcely imagine the benefits—50 years from now—of protecting Alaska's wild landscapes, or of developing new energy and other technologies that lessen the pressure on Alaska's natural resources.

"As the political pendulum swings back and forth, all it takes is one bad swing and something is lost forever," Hardigg says. "We would be foolish not to make use of this moment to permanently protect some of Alaska's greatest treasures. That is what we are working to do. It is what ACF is all about."

ACF Working for Alaska's Future:
Busting the Destructive Mining Boom

The rise in world mineral prices has created a tremendous demand for Alaska's mineral resources. Today's mining technology can achieve such economies of scale that it is profitable to extract more than 100,000 tons of ore each day from a single mine to recover fractions of ounces of precious metals per ton.

Such mining activities could have significant, long-term impacts on Alaska's water quality, air quality, ecosystem health, wildlife, and fish—impacts that will continue long after mining activities have ended.

Of the nearly 40 mines proposed for Alaska, the biggest is the massive gold and copper Pebble Mine in the Bristol Bay watershed, the world's largest wild sockeye salmon fishery. The region is an economic cornerstone of Alaska's economy, a vital source of subsistence for rural communities and Native cultures, and a world-renowned sportfishing destination.

ACF manages a grant program for the Bristol Bay Campaign, whose goal is to block development of the Pebble Mine. The organizations engaged include Nunamta Aulukestai, Trustees for Alaska, Earthworks, Renewable Resources Coalition, Trout Unlimited, The Wilderness Society, the National Parks Conservation Association, Center for Science in Public Participation, and Resource Media.

ACF also supports Alaskans for Responsible Mining, a coalition of 17 conservation organizations working together to address mining issues.