

Partners Outdoors 2010

Session: Understanding & Promoting the Social Benefits of Recreation

Topic: Chugach Children's Forest & Exploring the Idea of a National Network

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Description: The 5.5 million-acre Chugach National Forest is a vast and inspiring mix of glaciers, mountains, rainforest, and wild coastline—and the backyard of half of Alaska's population. This past year, the Chugach National Forest was dedicated as a *children's forest*, a symbolic designation underscored by substantive education, volunteer, and career leadership programs developed and supported by both the Forest Service and nonprofit and private sector partners. The Chugach Children's Forest is the Alaska Region's flagship approach to engaging local communities, reaching underserved populations, and empowering our next generation of public land stewards - our youth. The Chugach Children's Forest was in part established through active support of then Mayor, Mark Begich, who continues to lend active support as Senator.

The designation of the Chugach National Forest as a children's forest puts the Forest Service at the forefront of a growing movement to get kids *and* their families back outside. It also provides an opportunity to create a replicable model and a forum in which the Forest Service and its community partners inspire citizens to rediscover and reimagine America's national forests. A national network could be a far-reaching new approach to engaging communities in public land stewardship and empowering youth to create a better world. Inspired by existing Children's Forests in Alaska, California, Utah, and Montana a national Children's Forest network would advance innovative partnerships among the U.S. Forest Service, national nonprofits, and leading businesses focused on four overlapping goals critical to the nation's forests and the nation's future:

- ***Connecting Kids, Families, & Adults to Healthy, Outdoor Activities Across Landscapes.*** Improve long-term physical and mental health in children and adults through the many benefits of a connection to the outdoors and more active lifestyles; work with local schools, parks, other public lands developing ladders of opportunities for youth and citizens; reconnect an urbanizing world with the outdoors, public lands, and rural communities and landscapes.
- ***Supporting Economically Vital Communities by Creating New Education and Career Pathways.*** Invigorate K-12 education; expand mentorships and career options to create positive pathways for *all* youth; and help restore America's global competitiveness by empowering students in science, technology, and the connective power of new media.
- ***Fostering Climate Change Understanding and Solutions.*** Engage youth and connect the American public to the global and personal implications of climate change, through inspiring education programs and direct involvement in research and monitoring.
- ***Expanding Shared Stewardship and Civic Participation.*** Support and incubate high-quality youth and community engagement policies and programs that recognize citizens' potential to make lasting contributions for their communities and public lands.

Background & Key Points:

The Nation's forests are facing new pressures *and* opportunities as they enter their second century. Visitor use is changing, climate change threatens, wildfires intensify, and in an increasingly urbanized society, our youth need more help than ever to connect with nature and understand their role as future stewards of public lands. Like many, National Forests are being asked to do more with less. However, they need not, and should not, do it alone. To meet these challenges, the National Forest System needs more than new resources; it needs the help of a broader community.

Fortunately, our forests are strongly rooted in community, and have long-standing relationships with many communities of place and association. It's time to take those relationships to a new level, and National Forests are well-positioned to do so. Closely connected to both the nation's swelling population centers and rural villages and communities, the units of the National Forest System have an enormous opportunity to grow their community of stewards and help Americans of all ages rediscover their National Forests.

This opportunity – and responsibility - takes on even greater urgency when it comes to our children. Children are the future stewards and workforce of the nation's forests. Our youth are the key to renewing a constituency for forests, to connecting with families and stewards of all ages. Forests and children need each other, more than ever.

The health of America's children is in alarming decline. Studies show that isolation from nature may be a significant contributing factor to a wide range of childhood maladies, including obesity, asthma, attention disorders, and depression. Today's generation of "indoor children"—wired an average of six hours a day to television, the internet, video games, and cell phones—is missing the physical, emotional and developmental benefits of active outdoor play. Experts around the country are beginning to agree: children may need access to nature the same way they need good nutrition and adequate sleep.

In addition, studies show that children who spend little time outdoors are less likely, as adults, to engage in outdoor recreation or place a priority on conservation of natural resources. As our children become adults who are isolated from the natural environment, America's national forests are losing their public constituency, and the wildlife, outdoor recreation, nature-based tourism, and other ecosystem services that depend upon healthy public lands are facing an increasingly uncertain future. Several national trends already suggest a need for innovation to more effectively engage Americans in their National Forests.

Performance & Accomplishments: The Chugach Children's Forest grew from an initial partnership between Alaska Geographic and the Chugach National Forest. In the past year, more than 100 schools, organizations, and individuals from across many community sectors have joined together to contribute. Already, urban and rural students from across Alaska have shadowed scientists collecting data, presented fresh perspectives to forest rangers in a new "youth-managed section" of Portage Valley, and discovered new careers as wildlife biologists or forest kayak rangers. Next year, career mentoring programs will be expanded and four expeditions will pair youth with leading scientists in climate change research. Additionally, several intergenerational stewardship projects will bring youth and adults together to restore and enhance the landscape.

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