



The Southeast Steward



M. Green

View of the Mendenhall Wetlands from Mendenhall Peninsula.

Mendenhall Wetlands Accreted Lands Conservation Project

Southeast Alaska Land Trust is working with willing private landowners to secure a fixed boundary around the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge and to protect its conservation values. Situated in the geographic heart of Juneau, the Mendenhall Refuge is a 3,700-acre, tidally influenced wetland where the mixing of fresh and salt water estuaries and grasslands create critical habitat for more than 140 species of resident and migratory birds, nearly a dozen different mammals,

eight anadromous fish species, and an abundance of other marine life.

This treasured asset is shrinking because of "isostatic rebound," a natural phenomenon where by land, once pressed under glaciers, rises. At the Mendenhall Refuge, which has a boundary largely defined by the "mean-high tide line," many acres of land have risen above that mean-high mark. In most cases, the adjacent private landowners can claim these risen lands as "accretions" to their

property. With low-gradient tidal flats a characteristic feature of the area, and land rebounding 1/2 inch each year, these upland owner claims can extend into the original Refuge boundary by more than a thousand feet in some areas.

Using funds provided as mitigation for wetland impacts from the Juneau Airport project, Southeast Alaska Land Trust is offering to purchase these 'accreted lands' or an interest in these lands. The con-

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Conserving Wetlands with Mitigation Fees

The high precipitation and coastal topography create highly productive wetlands in the low-lying coastal terrain of Southeast Alaska. Some of these wet areas have inevitably been impacted because people and their activities are also found along the coast. While national wetlands policy discourages development in most wetland areas, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can grant permits for projects with unavoidable wetland impacts. In these cases, the Corps may require the developer to pay a fee *in-lieu* of mitigation which is then used to fund conservation projects. In keeping with its overall mission of conserving high-value habitats, SEAL Trust is authorized to receive *in-lieu fees* from development projects throughout Southeast Alaska. The substantial *in-lieu fees* paid by the Juneau Airport to mitigate impacts of improving airport safety will fund several conservation



Birds at the Mendenhall Wetlands

projects.

For more than a decade, SEAL Trust has teamed up with willing landowners, the Corps, communities, and resource agencies to identify wetlands worthy of conservation. *In-lieu fees* paid for land surveys, real estate appraisals, baseline environmental field studies, purchase and long-term stewardship funding for some properties where SEAL Trust now holds permanent conservation easements. For example, the Hilda Creek property on West Douglas Island (see related article) and a 112-acre parcel on the Farragut River Estuary north of Petersburg have conservation easements supported, in part, by *in-lieu fees*. SEAL Trust also

worked with Ketchikan organizations to identify suitable properties where *in-lieu fees* could help support wetland conservation. The *Mendenhall Wetlands Accreted Lands Conservation Project* article in this newsletter describes a current SEAL Trust effort involving *in-lieu fees*.

Federal regulations in 2008 revised the rules for *in-lieu fee* programs, and SEAL Trust is now updating its legal *in-lieu fee* agreement with the Corps. At this time, SEAL Trust is a mature organization with the capability to step up to the 2008 rules and continue to offer landowners, public works and private developers, communities, and resource agencies a competent *in-lieu fee* pro-

gram. As part of the update, SEAL Trust and the Corps will undertake a public review/outreach to inform interested parties in Southeast Alaska about the *in-lieu fee* program. SEAL Trust's objectives for a *in-lieu fee* program include conserving high-value aquatic habitats that provide important functions, identifying and acquiring properties to satisfy Corps permitting obligations in an efficient and timely manner, and providing public benefit through high-value properties that also offer open space, passive recreation, drinking water protection, and other services important to Southeast Alaska communities.

Hilda Creek: the Rest of the Story...

In August, SEAL Trust purchased a 36-acre property at the mouth of Hilda Creek on the back side of Douglas Island. We donated the land to the City and Borough of Juneau, subject to the terms of a conservation agreement that assures it is managed as a "natural or conservation area". Acquiring this property is important not only because of its ecological significance, but also for its contribution to the long-term vision for Hilda Cove as a low-impact, recreational use area in the community's West Douglas Concept Plan.

Five salmon species populate the Hilda Creek watershed -- the 2nd largest on Douglas Island. Hilda and her unnamed twin creek

braid through low-lying, riverine wetlands on the property. Also, a recent survey shows more than seven acres of the broad Hilda Cove estuarine flat has accreted to the upland property since the original 1923 survey. Hilda Cove is also a favorite camping spot along Stevens Passage. SEAL Trust's recent purchase of this property protects these conservation values, provides an upland buffer for the large estuary and gives the public access to this important natural area.

A 2008 proposal by the previous owner would have subdivided the Hilda Creek parcel into multiple private lots repeatedly bisecting the stream channels. The private residences on the uplifted beach along the



waterfront, and their likely four-wheeler paths, would soon dominate the riverine bottom lands and large estuarine flat in Hilda Cove.

By contrast, the 1997 West Douglas Conceptual plan, developed by City and Borough of Juneau and Goldbelt, Inc, envisioned protection of high-valued wetlands, anadromous streams, and cultural sites. Development would occur in "nodes" between these large passive use, natural areas. Hilda Cove would become the premier low-impact recreation area in this part of Douglas Island.

At that time, Goldbelt and the CBJ agreed to a land exchange whereby CBJ would receive land which gave the City water access to Stevens Passage on land along the

west side of Hilda Creek, adjacent to the 36-acre parcel SEAL Trust just purchased. This future City land, coupled with the Hilda Creek parcel, would adjoin a large CBJ-owned recreational reserve farther up in the Hilda drainage.

Although any land exchange and West Douglas development is not likely for some time, SEALTrust's recent purchase and conservation easement provides immediate protection of the ecological values of the lower Hilda Creek drainage and Hilda Cove and sets the stage for some future "Hilda Cove Natural Area Park and Recreation Area" at the end of the proposed road. This project was funded with fees-in-lieu of mitigation from the Juneau Airport Project.



Extreme low tide at Hilda Cove. Lands acquired shown in red.

Introducing New Staff

SEALTrust works with willing landowners and communities to ensure that vital natural areas, throughout the region and within your community, remain in place for the benefit each generation. Our success bring increased responsibility and opportunity. To help meet the growing demands for our services, SEALTrust is pleased to have on staff, two new and very gifted individuals. Gretchen Keiser has been serving as our Conservation Specialist since April and Rebecca Hartwell is our new Conservation Assistant.



"Southeast Alaska's natural treasures enjoy increased significance to me the more I kayak along its wild shores and travel around the world."

Gretchen has a Bachelor's of Science degree in Science Education from Cornell University and a Master's of Science in Biology from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. In Alaska since the mid-1970s, Gretchen has worked in natural resources as a field biologist, legislative analyst, coastal program manager, city planner and water quality regulatory manager.

She also serves on the Board of Directors for True North Federal Credit Union and Rainforest Yoga – two not-for-profit organizations important to the well being of the Juneau community. Gretchen brings her enthusiasm for the conservation of Southeast Alaska's natural landscapes, coupled with her personal interests in kayaking, gardening, yoga, and travel.

Rebecca has a Bachelor's degree in Politics and Environmental Studies from Whitman College. She studied community-based ecotourism in Sikkim, India for her Senior Honor Thesis and, after college, traveled in Malaysia with a US Fulbright Fellowship where she taught English in a rural community for a year. Rebecca came to Alaska as an intern with Sitka Conservation Society through the Alaska Conservation Foundation internship program. Enchanted by the region, Rebecca extended her stay last season to work as a deckhand on a commercial troller. She now lives in Juneau and continues her dedicated conservation work.



"From exploring remote bays in an old wooden fishing boat to backpacking in the forest and alpine, I am continuously amazed and humbled by the beauty and richness of Southeast Alaska."



Board member, Craig Lindh, in front of a ground stake marking the boundary of one landowner's accreted land.

Accreted Lands Project

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conservation options we offer include our fee simple purchase of the accreted lands, accepting tax-deductible donations of accreted lands, or the establishing conservation easements on these lands while they remain in private ownership. The positive responses from landowners thus far is

very encouraging and SEAL trust is eager to work with each individual landowner to find the approach that works best for them. Our intent is to ensure the long-term integrity of this remarkable resource for wildlife and the for Juneau community.

How Can I Help?

- ⇒ Become a member.
- ⇒ Make a tax-deductible donation.
- ⇒ Volunteer your time.
- ⇒ Tell a friend about SEALTrust.

SEALTrust depends on membership donations to pay operation expenses and to provide match for critical grants. As a member, you join a team of friends and neighbors concerned about safeguarding vital natural areas.