

Wild paradise within
the national park.



Land Dispute

One Point of Agreement

WE FIGHT OVER THE LAND. PERHAPS IT'S one of the last things worth fighting for—after all, there's a finite amount of it to go around—and seven billion people trying to dwell on it.

Even the places once covered up by ice—now unveiled by global warming—are being snapped up. New trade routes emerge, and following that, the bridges and roads that connect them. Valuable resources, such as oil, can be drilled for in areas once deemed inaccessible. And so, we fight.

In my travels this summer, I visited a tiny pocket of paradise I won't name here. The story goes that the site was originally settled as an Alaskan Native village, at least until a volcano blew in 1912, and six feet of ash and lava destroyed almost everything. By the 1960s, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) had solidified their position on the site, building a church and converting Natives to Christianity. But in 1964, the big earthquake hit, and along with it, the ensuing tsunamis. The swells of water swept away the ROC settlement. Most of the people fled; Natives relocated to nearby islands, convinced that their former place of residence was damaged beyond repair. The land remained largely uninhabited after that.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and a national park formed around the vacated parcel. When remains of both Alaska

Native tribe and ROC buildings and artifacts were found, the government set out to determine the rightful owner of the property. After some time, they determined that because the ROC was the last known inhabitant, they would retain rights to the inholding within the park.

The ROC held onto the land, but didn't do anything with it. After a time, a man who lived in Alaska (but was neither an Alaska Native or native Alaskan) approached the ROC with a proposal to lease the land from the ROC to create a bear viewing operation. Impermanent structures would be built on raised platforms, in order to leave any Native or ROC artifacts undisturbed. The ROC agreed to a 20-year land lease, and the man began to build his dream.

Over the next 20 years, the man worked to train guides and teach Leave No Trace principles. He created an environment where the coastal brown bears became habituated to human presence, neither looking at people as prey nor fearing them as hunters. Only a handful of visitors could stay at one time to reduce negative impact on the wilderness. Wolves, bears and bald eagles fished the salmon-saturated creeks in harmony with each other, while photographers watched. The place gained some fame. Word spread. And over the last few years, a Native corporation approached the ROC saying that their spiritual ancestors were unhappy about the way the land was being used. The ground was a sacred and historical part of their traditional culture and rightful heritage. The ROC agreed, but didn't cede the land to the Native corporation.

Instead, when the man's lease was up, the ROC told him they would not be renewing it, and further, that he had one year to dismantle the lodge and vacate it. Twenty years of work—gone.

Now, the man's "lodge" exists as a series of tents in the national park a few miles from the inholding it once called home. The man moves the tents two miles every two weeks, as required by the NPS. Instead of a composting toilet and shower, guests must dig a hole in the bushes. There's no running water. No generators. The guides are upset, worried about what will happen to the old site. Will it be developed? Will the next purveyor exploit the land or be a diligent steward of its resources?

No one can dispute that Alaska Natives made their home in Alaska first—and that they revered the land, inhabiting it with passion and respect. And yet, it wasn't the first time in my travels to hear about these types of land conflicts. Isn't Alaska big enough for everyone to enjoy it? And, who really gave any of us the authority to "own" what's beneath our feet? We stake our claims, all of us, on that which was really never ours to begin with. The same battle plays out over and over again for the land, seas, moon and even Mars.

At the bear-viewing site, I stand on a bluff overlooking a bay, a few miles from the disputed lease. I watch a lean, timberwolf disappear from view, only to pop up just beneath me, walk toward me, and amble away. This much I know: I want the opportunity to see this wolf—for my ten-year old son—and his grandchildren too. We all want to feel that connection with something greater; we want the land for its beauty and our subsistence. We see the same thing Alaska Natives saw in the 1800s. And as we show in this issue, we can all benefit from knowing more about Alaska Natives' character, traditions, arts and resilience. Most of all: We might learn that we are more alike than different with regards to our love of the land and the wild places in Alaska.

Cheers,

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