

Admiralty: A Unique Problem

Admiralty has been called an island in contention.

The issue that stirs such fervor over Admiralty is whether the 1,664 square mile island should remain in its natural state, out of reach of a voracious logging industry, or whether timber development should take place, at the possible expense of subsistence fish, wildlife and recreation values.

Small portions of the island have been clearcut, but that was years ago. Mining is also a thing of the past. Old fish plants, except one still in operation, are in ruins or overgrown.

Although other parts of Alaska are or will soon be the objects of similar attention from conservationists and developers, the case of Admiralty Island is unique because of the people who are disputing its destiny:

—Angoon, the only permanent settlement on the island, represented by a municipal government and Kootznoowoo, Inc., a village corporation created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. The seasonal subsistence activities of the town (including fishing, hunting for bear and deer, and kelp and berry gathering) dovetail nicely with commercial fishing seasons and the few other part-time jobs that are available.

—Shee Atika, Inc., one of four urban Native corporations (Kenai, Kodiak and Juneau are the others) formed to serve Native shareholders who did not wish to be registered as at-large shareholders in Native regional corporations but who have stronger ties with urban neighbors than friends or relatives in rural communities.

—Goldbelt, Inc., like Shee Atika, an urban Native corporation formed under the land claims act to serve Native shareholders living in Juneau;

—The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, and their respective Departments of Agriculture and Interior, have been largely responsible for determining how public land shall be used and how it is to be conveyed to Native corporations created to manage the land and financial assets of the land claims act. Since the issue has been taken to court, these agencies seem to have lost the initiative in resolving the battle for Admiralty;

—The Sierra Club, a powerful nationwide conservation dedicated to preservation of wild and scenic areas and advocate of more restrictive use of the environment. Among other non-development values the club wants to protect are the fantastic bald eagle nesting areas and brown



bear habitat of the island.

Peter Jack, mayor of Angoon, tells a congressional committee:

"There are those who say that all the competing interests can be accommodated on Admiralty Island. They would carve it up, designating areas for recreation and other areas for logging. The biggest problem with that is that it's our area they want to log. It is our area that has the largest trees and therefore the greatest value in the foreign marketplace. But that is not what the people of Angoon want."

Contrary to the views of some outsiders, Goldbelt and Shee Atika, despite their professed interest in logging portions of Admiralty, are not monolithic multi-national corporations bent on tearing up the old island.

Urban Native corporations, according to provisions of the land claims act, were to share in the giant 40 million acre, billion-dollar settlement by receiving title to 23,040 acres of land—no money into the bargain. Needless to say, with a mandate to turn profits for expectant shareholders without the necessary seed money, the urban corporations have found themselves in a difficult situation. Some relief came in 1975 when Congress passed several amendments to the act, including a provision granting each of the urban corporations \$250,000 for planning purposes.

With such limited financial resources, Shee Atika and Goldbelt have looked long and hard for 23,040 acres which will provide adequate returns for their shareholders. They have looked long and hard at Admiralty.

Warren Weathers, executive director of Shee Atika, says there is not enough land available in the Tongass National Forest (which takes in most of the southeastern Panhandle) for the Sitka and Juneau corporations to make selections from. Although they could select land already under long-term timber sales contracts covering about three quarters of the Panhandle, they would only own the land, none of the timber, an unacceptable option.

The controversy over Ad-

miralty has been alternately heating and cooling off for several years. In the summer of 1973, Alaska Geographic magazine published a proposal by the Sierra Club to designate the island as a restricted use area (no logging), arguing that it would be in the national interest to preserve the natural values of the island:

"One major island representing the many living habitats of Southeast Alaska should be protected. Of all the major islands, Admiralty shows by far the least effects of human use. This island has a relatively undisturbed representation of the natural communities of Southeast Alaska, with lowland communities particularly extensive. By comparison, Glacier Bay National Monument, though vast, is mainly bare country...and what large old growth timber exists is mainly remote and seldom enjoyed.

After two years of negotiations, an agreement was drawn up, in June, 1977. In order to become effective, the parties, including the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, had to sign the document by the end of July.

The Admiralty agreement provided that Goldbelt and Shee Atika would search for lands of equal value elsewhere in the Tongass, and that if such lands were found, Angoon would drop its objections to the Goldbelt and Shee Atika selections on the island. The agreement would have rendered moot the six lawsuits and counter-suits previously filed by the corporations against the government and one another.

But the agreement fell apart and as a result, one attorney involved indicates it may be "very long litigation."

Actually, the agreement was never really activated. Shee Atika, the two government agencies and the Sierra Club never signed at all. In November, Goldbelt withdrew.

The importance of the island to Angoon people is illustrated by their sponsorship of a bill that would set aside Admiralty Island as a National Preserve. This would place management of non-private land on the island in the hands of the

National Park Service. A preserve would restrict land use more tightly than the present national forest designation, but not as much as a national park. Hearings on the bill, held this summer in conjunction with other public land law hearings, gave Angoon residents a forum to present their case to the nation.

Peter Jack, Sr., mayor of Angoon:

"I grew up on Admiralty Island. I remember the stories my father told me as a boy, about living on the land. When they cut a tree for firewood, to smoke a salmon, or for their houses, they covered the stump with moss. It was their belief that it would make the tree grow back more quickly. They believed if you were good to the land, it would be good to you. They had respect for the land, so much so, that they talked to the land.

"I wish I had listened more to my father. We have taken the land too much for granted. But now we have seen what has happened in other areas.

"At Hood Bay, X'uyah in Tlingit, and the White-water Bay area, called Nuldooshgun, where the trees have been logged, there are no fish now and the deer are scarce.

"We don't want our land and water to be ruined and drive away the animals and fish. People who live in other places that were logged, come to Admiralty to hunt and fish. We don't want the same thing to happen to us."

Daniel Johnson, Sr., president of Kootznoowoo, Inc., told the Sieberling subcommittee:

"...the people who live in Angoon live there because Angoon is like it is. We have no reason to want to change the lifestyle of our people."

The phrase "lifestyle" is critical to the Admiralty debate, as it is in other areas where rural Alaskans must weigh the benefits and liabilities of resource development. What the term attempts to convey is that the town, despite years of contacts with western civilization and industrialized society, still follows a seasonal calendar primarily based on the hunting, fishing and gathering of land and sea resources. It is a way of survival which incorporates elements of modern technology, but not necessarily western values. A rural, subsistence lifestyle implies a different pace, a different way of thinking about birth, life and death that is often foreign to the minds of outsiders.

As much as the consequences of actual logging operations on the land itself, the people of Angoon

seek preservation of Admiralty because they fear what may happen to the village and its pace of life as a result of population growth and other secondary effects of timber development. As Johnson bluntly puts it: "We would be overrun by outsiders."

What Angoon wants is more orderly, more easily controlled recreation development and preservation of its subsistence commercial fishing economy.

Pointing to impressive statistics which indicate that the tourism industry in Alaska is growing about 20 percent annually, Johnson says, "We have looked into the recreation business at length and we think it suits the needs of Kootznoowoo, the city and the people of Angoon."

Goldbelt and Shee Atika are not insensitive to such goals. Indeed Shee Atika hopes to open its own lodge next year and Goldbelt President Wilson indicates that his corporation does not necessarily intend to reap all its profits from cutting timber.

Still, the two urban corporations feel they must move to protect their timber options, and for different reasons, neither felt the defunct agreement tentatively reached last year would serve that purpose.

Goldbelt's Joe Wilson points out that selecting all or most of its entitlement in one place (and Admiralty provides the only place where this could happen) makes land management much easier and development more economically feasible. Wilson said Goldbelt has filed for 2,600 acres off of Admiralty and 36,000 acres about 20 miles north of Angoon.

When Goldbelt withdrew from the Admiralty agreement, Wilson laid blame for failure of the settlement at the feet of the federal government, which he said showed no interest in fulfilling its part of the bargain. The Forest Service was to conduct a study, jointly funded by the corporations, to determine if lands of equal value were available off the island. After telegraphing Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus and waiting for a reaction from the Department of Agriculture, Wilson explains:

"We never did get a response as to whether they 'would enter into the agreement or not. Inasmuch as we did not get a positive response from Agriculture and Interior, therefore we felt it was not worthwhile to try to pursue the agreement as a means of solving the problem."

According to Regional Forester John Sandor, based in Juneau, the government was unhappy with the agreement:

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"There were several problems with the agreement. One was the value of the lands and resources involved. And there was the need for an Environmental Impact Statement.

"Any land exchange that took place ought to deal with equal values. We (the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management) are on record as being agreeable to proposing alternative areas to Goldbelt and Shee Atika off Admiralty Island provided the land should be of equal value. I think there's land available; it's a question of whether there is land close enough to be manageable

and accessible."

Sandor confirms the view of Goldbelt and Shee Atika that land on the westward, or Angoon side of Admiralty, has the highest timber values. He estimated the stands, "much better than average," could produce about 60,000 board feet per acre.

Sierra Club Alaska Representative Jack Hession explains: "We didn't think the terms were acceptable. We were all for the search for (alternate) lands, and we're confident that they can be found. But in the event that the search failed, we were not prepared to accept Goldbelt

and Shee Atika selections on Admiralty."

Hession said the Sierra Club would support either the Angoon Preserve bill, or a bill designating Admiralty as a National Forest Preserve (introduced earlier this year by Secretary Andrus) because the bills are very similar. He predicted Angoon would also be content with either proposal because many of their concerns addressed in their own bill were drafted in the National Forest Preserve bill.

The prolonged debate over the fate of Admiralty Island seems far from over. Whether the issue will be re-

solved in the courts or in the Congress is still unclear. All of the lawsuits have been consolidated and are now lodged with the U.S. District Court in Anchorage and legal proceedings may heat up in the near future since the out-of-court agreement has fallen through. However, Admiralty is high on the list of priorities of national environmental groups and Congress could move more quickly than the courts toward a solution of the problem as it begins marking up a bill to classify all of Alaska's public domain early this year.

The Angoon position

stands out for its simplicity and clarity. As Angoon resident Verna Johnson puts it:

"...it seems that we still have a long hard battle ahead of us. Even though the Forest Service was not very convincing at these hearings they will have other chances to talk to you. They will present you with facts and figures, maps, charts and graphs, complex computations and mathematical formulas. We hope you will take all this with a grain of salt and remember the basic problem. They want to cut down all the trees and we want to save our way of life."