

## **Alaska: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow Environmental Wars**

Not only will Alaskans be faced with the challenge of the opening ANWR and NPR-A to oil development in the future, but they must also turn their attention to other issues relating to conservation and development. The closing of the two pulp mills in the Tongass National Forest in the 1990s meant a smaller timber harvest in Alaska, but did not eliminate it. Logs still are cut for export, and some developers hope to create “value-added industries” (i.e., processing the timber into partially or wholly finished products before shipping them out of the state). Alaskans will need to decide whether they support opening more of the forest to harvest, or maintain - or even strengthen- environmental protections on the forest.

Another major Alaskan environmental issue involves the bottom fishery in the Bering Sea. More fish are harvested annually in Alaska than anywhere else in the United States. Much of the catch is hake, Pollack and other bottom fish. But the methods used to harvest those fish may destroy the sea floor, and the many species that depend on sea floor flora and fauna. Alaskans will need to decide whether to support a continued harvest, or to support those calling for limitations on the Bering Sea fishery.

In the late 1990s, environmentalists noted that the populations of Steller sea lion in the Bering Sea and elsewhere were quickly declining. Some scientists suggest that the food eaten by Stellar sea lions – a protected species - was being damaged or destroyed by the bottom fishery. Some environmentalists asked the courts to stop some Bering Sea fishing in order to protect the sea lions. The courts agreed and, restricted the fishery in places where plentiful sea lion populations were known to gather. Later, continuing research suggested that the bottom fishery might not be to blame for the decline of the sea lion population, and the court eased its restrictions.

These kinds of issues and dilemmas will continue to surface in Alaska, and Alaskans will need to decide how to respond to them. A knowledge of the history of environmental issues in Alaska will help y lead to better-informed judgments on how what to do.

How will knowledge of Alaska’s many environmental challenges help Alaskans understand the challenge of sustainability, having enough resources to sustain the life styles we have chosen without exhausting the resources on which those life styles depend?