

Be Good to Gravina

We worked our bicycles up a single-lane road, punching down on the pedals. Our bike tires had become caked with chalk-pale mud and chains ground—chuck, chuck—in a muddy cluster of gears.

The road, course gray gravel on spongy black soil, is just months old, part of ex-Gov. Frank Murkowski's "Road to Resources" program, a controversial scheme to rush bids on what he called "pioneer roads."

This road, like the one he began in Juneau, was started without permits in place. When officials with the Army Corps of Engineers—known for giving approval to every rumpled napkin sketch that comes its way—came out to size up the road in the fall, they were appalled. Little had been done to control erosion caused by the project.

The Corps staff immediately tried to issue a cease-and-desist order, putting road building on hold. Then came a mysterious communiqué from the Corps' headquarters, rescinding the possibility of ceasing and desisting.

We stopped at a rise next to a gravel pit. The pit tore into a bank of muskeg at the edge of a broad meadow stippled with scrub hemlock. Rocks had been pushed into the wetland to prevent the quarry from flooding. Mud bled tan into a black pool.

We could hear the chainsaws, whining angry bees, in the mountainside grove beyond.

Then came the crash of a falling tree in a dark artery of forest, a cleft in the mountainside where the tallest, thickest and oldest trees live out quiet centuries.

While I stooped to fix my chain, a truck packed with orange, flaking logs barreled by. The road quivered.

I got the feeling this was a perverse vengeance for the demise of the bridge-to-nowhere project, like the robber who beats the hell out of you when you show him you don't have any money—just for.

Just for jobs, someone said the other night. I had asked why the state should give \$6 million in public money to someone to build a road, and why can't any of my friends get the same fat subsidy for their businesses.

"How long have you lived here?" he asked me.

I guessed there were about a dozen folks working off the Gravina Island road last Saturday, felling trees, driving truck, or operating other machinery. We waved as they passed us on the road. Sometimes someone would roll a window down and we'd yell a few jokes over the chug of the engines and across the stumps, where we stood with our mud-slathered bikes.

They're locals, after all. They also stand in line at the liquor store, put quarters in the jar for a new library, and watch too many movies.

But I wonder whether the man sitting in the metallic dragon, grabbing enormous logs in black pincers and stacking them in a pile as clean as cordwood, cares that much about the creek beside him, the hundreds of voles crushed beneath debris (food for owls, eagles), or the leaking drum of oil. Does he ask himself whether the community should have a say on how public land is used or how public money is spent?

After two hours and seven miles of climbing, we were in the heart of the “nowhere” sought by advocates of a bridge.

Ahead of us was a steep clearcut. Loggers wrapped bundles of trees while two cranes hummed on the roadway. Suddenly, we heard a man cry out in agonizing pain, then an alarm.

A truck pulled up next to us. The driver spoke into the radio, said aloud that the alarm was “just a test.”

On the way back, we stopped one more time for a view of Ketchikan. “See that view,” a logging company owner once told me as we gazed out over a hundred or more acres of leveled forest near Cordova, “only a logger can create that kind of a view.”

Another truck bounced down the road, then, to our surprise, a school bus.

The bus barely straddled the thin road. The driver glanced at us quickly.

Workers were slumped against the muddy, fogged windows.

They would miss the ride down.