

Katharine Wilkinson ([00:08](#)):

Last summer I got a very special chance to explore the largest, intact, temperate rainforest in the world. A place many consider to be the most important forest in the US, The Tongass. The Tongass stretches across the panhandle of Southeast Alaska, which is composed of more than 1,000 islands. Its lush greenery plunges directly into a vast sea kelp forest beneath the water, and it's one of the oldest ecosystems in Alaska, as one of the first pieces of land uncovered after the last Ice Age. Most of it is encompassed within the 16.7 million acre Tongass National Forest.

([00:54](#)):

I spent almost two weeks there, mostly at a remote off-grid cabin. I saw pink salmon spawning and otters stuffing themselves with muscles. I heard bald eagles calling. I watched a mama brown bear and three cubs grazing on an inlet, thankfully, from the relative safety of a kayak. I gathered blueberries and salmon berries beneath towering spruce trees and hemlocks, and gawked at the wild riot of epiphytes. Mosses, lichens, everywhere you look, and I talked with people. People who live, work and play on that land, who love the Tongass and revere it as sacred.

([01:33](#)):

But the Tongass doesn't just matter to the people and the creatures who call it home, it's one of America's most substantial carbon sinks. By one estimate, the massive old growth trees that flourish there hold more than 40% of all carbon stored by American national forests. The problem is, those same big trees are seriously valuable timber, and for decades, some have seen cutting them as the only viable engine for a struggling economy in Southeast Alaska. This is A Matter of Degrees: Stories for the Climate Curious. I'm Dr. Katharine Wilkinson.

Leah Stokes ([02:15](#)):

And I'm Dr. Leah Stokes.

Katharine Wilkinson ([02:18](#)):

Today, we're going to consider what's possible for the Tongass, what we stand to lose if we lose the forest, but also what we can gain from the people who are reimagining the decades-long fight to protect it.

Leah Stokes ([02:30](#)):

I'm really excited to hear the story that you've brought us today, Katharine, because I know that that trip you took had a big impact on you, and I know that this Tongass Forest has been through a lot.

Katharine Wilkinson ([02:41](#)):

It has, and we're going to get to all of it, or at least as much as we can in one podcast episode. To begin this Tongass journey, I reached out to Marina Anderson, one of the forest's most important advocates. She's a prominent tribal and community leader, and the deputy director of a local collective impact network called the Sustainable Southeast Partnership. Marina was born and raised in Southeast Alaska.

Marina Anderson ([03:11](#)):

Marina Anderson, [foreign language 00:03:20]. Mary Bell [foreign language 00:03:32], Robert Kennedy [foreign language 00:03:34], James Anderson [foreign language 00:03:38], Forest Anderson [foreign language 00:03:44], Prince of Wales Islands [inaudible 00:03:47]. My name is Marina Anderson. I'm of the Raven [foreign language 00:03:50] from the Sculpin House. My people are from Heenya Kwan, which is known today as Klowack, on Prince of Wales Island. My grandmother was Mary Bell. My grandfather was Robert Kennedy. My father was James Anderson. My mother is Forest Anderson. I'm Haida and I am Tlingit and I live on Prince of Wales Island.

([04:14](#)):

Walking through old growth forest in the Tongass is different than walking through old growth in other places. We are compared to places like the Redwoods, but we're very, very different. Walking through the Tongass, you feel small, but you also feel like you're part of the land. The trees are huge and they're full of life in themselves. The forest floor is soft, because of many years of plant matter building up to create the dirt and the moss that we walk on. It feels squishy under your feet, like you're walking on mattresses at times. There are big roots that weave in and out underneath your feet, and those root systems can be matched with the tangling tree branches that are above your head.

([05:04](#)):

The Tongass can be quiet at first, but the longer that you're walking through it, the more that you begin to hear. You can hear every branch that's breaking from the animals in the distance, you can hear birds flying from tree-to-tree or singing to each other. You can hear the little critters crawling around on the floor near you, and you become very aware of your own body and yourself as you're making sounds

through the forest, whether you're stepping into a soggy bed of moss or stepping over dry branches. It feels scary for some people to be walking in the Tongass. I hear that a lot of people get turned around or are not able to really find their footing or their direction, but for some of us, it feels comforting to be in the Tongass. It feels like you're being hugged by the ecosystem and like you're in a safe space, like a safe home.

Katharine Wilkinson ([06:02](#)):

And it is a home. The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people have lived on these lands for more than 10,000 years. And even though Tlingit translates to People of the Tides, in many ways, it's the forest and its huge old trees that define daily life in Southeast Alaska.

Marina Anderson ([06:20](#)):

The Tongass is really everything to me. The Tongass is what has kept my people thriving in this area for thousands of years. If we want to break it down to resources, we can look at cedar trees alone, and look at what cedar has provided for our people and what we've been able to utilize those cedars for. Baskets and methods for carrying water out of the bark of the tree, we could make our transportation, which was the canoes, out of the wood of the tree, planks of the cedar trees were used for our houses. We used the bark to weave our clothes. Everything that we utilized really came from the Tongass and it came from the cedar trees. We're known as the people of the sea, but we're people that also go into the forest and utilize that forest. It's a place where we're able to find healing, to go for prayer, to find any medicine that we've been able to use for our people, and even more so, the Tongass is a place that's provided protection, abundance, and life for us for thousands of years.

Leah Stokes ([07:34](#)):

The people who live in what we today call Southeast Alaska, it sounds like they were really living off of these forest resources in a reciprocal way, for thousands of years.

Katharine Wilkinson ([07:45](#)):

Yeah, people were using and making things from the forest, and engaging in commerce and trade long before colonization. The trees really have been the lifeblood of this balanced, thriving ecosystem and the tribal cultures that have been living in relationship with it.

Leah Stokes ([08:03](#)):

And it sounds like just as these trees in the forest, they were valuable in the past, I imagine that today there are people who see the value in a different way, right? Rather than seeing the value of this forest as a living ecosystem, there are people who see the value of dead trees?

Katharine Wilkinson ([08:21](#)):

Yes, timber, these trees are worth a lot. And at the turn of the 20th century, the US federal government decided that they were so valuable, in fact, that this area should 'belong' to the American people as a national forest. And of course, that designation didn't include the people who'd actually lived on the land for millennia.

Marina Anderson ([08:45](#)):

The Tongass was designated a national forest in 1907, and the purpose of designating the Tongass National Forest was to steward the lands properly for America. But really, it was to be able to control the resources that come from the Tongass. Those resources that were highly sought after during that time, and still today, is the timber that comes from the Tongass. The designation of the national forest has shaped the fate of the place that us Haida and Tlingit and Tsimshian people call home, in a way that has opened it up for natural resource extraction. It opened the flood gates for companies to come in and essentially take our relatives from the land and remove them from this place. It scarred our backyards, it scarred our homes. It removed that cover that I was talking about that hugs you so gently as you're walking through it, and in turn has changed the way that we're able to access our foods and our medicines and our spiritual connection to the place as well.

Katharine Wilkinson ([09:58](#)):

The floodgates really opened in the 1950s. The US Forest Service signed 50-year contracts with two giant, corporate pulp mills, and designated billions of old growth trees for commercial logging. And then in the 1970s, logging got another boost, perhaps a somewhat surprising one, with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. This legislation turned over ownership of millions of acres of land from the federal government to Alaska Native Corporations.

Leah Stokes ([10:28](#)):

This sounds like a huge win for the Indigenous peoples of Alaska, because the community was finally able to steward their own resources, and really that they got their land back that had been taken from them.

Katharine Wilkinson ([10:40](#)):

I think that's true, Leah, and also it was complicated, because the Alaska Native Corporations also started participating in this clear-cutting timber boom. I think it felt only fair that all this economic activity in the region should benefit the original peoples of the Tongass, but it's fraught, because it also entangled them in that destruction. This feels a bit like asking someone to describe the scene of a crime, but with noting that, I was hoping you could talk a little bit about what the timber heyday was like in Southeast Alaska. When was that happening, and what was taking place?

Marina Anderson ([11:26](#)):

The timber heyday in Southeast Alaska? That was in the eighties and nineties, and I was born in '93, so I experienced the tail end of it. My dad was a logger at the time, and I lived in a area that was clear-cut, not long before my family moved out there. As a kid, honestly, it was a lot of fun to go and see him at logging camp and hop in a front end loader or check out his saws or bring him his bar and chain oil. He'd cut little chairs into stumps for me to sit in, in the clear-cuts. He'd let me run around in the clear-cuts and play. I didn't really realize what was happening around me. At that time, he didn't really realize what was happening around him either. He was part of that era where they were some of the first to really start hitting the forest hard, and really start stripping away swaths of trees.

Katharine Wilkinson ([12:34](#)):

Clear-cutting was the dominant method of harvest. Huge sections of forest disappeared, but for a while, the economic returns seemed worth it.

Marina Anderson ([12:44](#)):

The schools were full of students and there were robust communities. The economy seemed like it was doing okay, the Western economy did. Almost everybody's father or uncle or both were loggers, and most people benefited financially from the logging boom. It seemed like overnight it stopped. It fell asleep. Our school populations shrunk, families moved out. That money wasn't flowing in the communities anymore. People that were building up their skills to work in the fields that were related to logging all of a sudden had no employment opportunities

available and a lot of families were left devastated. The people that were really rooted here in Southeast Alaska around the Tongass National Forest had to be innovative or go without for a long time, or go with less, as they fought through the transition out of that logging boom era.

Katharine Wilkinson ([13:52](#)):

By the end of the 20th century, the Tongass was one of the last national forests that still allowed industrial scale clear-cut logging of old growth trees, all the way from the hillside to the stream bank. And that was largely because of those Forest Service contracts, those 50-year contracts that had been signed with the pulp mills in the 1950s. But grassroots efforts by conservationists and people in the fishing industry, they helped pass the Tongass Timber Reform Act of 1990. The legislation modified those contracts, stopped industrial logging in many parts of the forest, and created new protections for trees near salmon streams, which are critical for continuing the salmon life cycle.

Leah Stokes ([14:34](#)):

It sounds like by the early nineties, things started to move in a better direction and the forest started to be protected?

Katharine Wilkinson ([14:41](#)):

Yeah, there was all this conversation about conservation and the environment. And the other thing that started growing during that time was the tourism industry in Southeast Alaska, which as you can imagine, really hinges on the beauty of a living forest.

Leah Stokes ([14:56](#)):

Yeah, I imagine that if people want to go see a living forest, they're not interested in seeing the logging camps and the stumps and the clear-cuts. They probably want to see the living forest.

Katharine Wilkinson ([15:07](#)):

They do. And then something major happened in 2001. Just days before leaving the White House, President Bill Clinton issued a policy directive for something called the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. As the name suggests, the new Roadless Rule prevented road construction and commercial timber harvest in big sections of

national forest. Leah, can you guess what happened with this rule Clinton shoved through in those final days of his presidency?

Leah Stokes ([15:37](#)):

This will be a tough one. A bunch of people are going to stop making money. They can't make as much profit from cutting down trees. What will they do in the American system? Oh, maybe sue and get the rule stuck in the courts so that it can't be implemented? Just brainstorming here.

Katharine Wilkinson ([15:53](#)):

Just brainstorming, but my, it's a good brainstorm. This was a particularly emotional policy for folks on both sides of the aisle. The Roadless Rule was huge, because it ended virtually all industrial logging in 58 million acres of American national forests, and that included 9 million acres in the Tongass and it started a debate that really hasn't died since.

Leah Stokes ([16:20](#)):

Yeah, I think this is how a lot of our listeners may have heard of the Tongass before. This began this endless back and forth cycle, like a ping-pong game, with the Roadless Rule exists, and you can't go cut the forest down, because the Democrats are in office. And no, the Roadless Rule is out and it's time to go cut the forest again. It really just went up and down, depending on whether it was Republicans or Democrats in the White House.

Katharine Wilkinson ([16:44](#)):

And it was this ping-pong of ecology, economy, ecology, economy, na, na, na, right? And what we have to remember is that Southeast Alaska is rural, really rural, and in a lot of places, there are no roads, there's no cell service, there's no basic infrastructure. I learned this the hard way when I needed to access a prescription medication while I was there, and it took two or three days and a float plane to get that sorted. And for decades, logging really was the bedrock of the local economy, as Marina talks about. The Roadless Rule surfaced this critical question. Can places like Southeast Alaska, rural places, survive without an extractive industry like logging?

Leah Stokes ([17:37](#)):

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Yeah, and this back and forth makes it seem like there's only two choices for Southeast Alaska. One, preserve the forest and ruin the economy, or two, save the economy and ruin the forest.

Katharine Wilkinson ([17:48](#)):

And obviously, this is a false dichotomy and it ignores the fact that the Roadless Rule only applies, actually, to about half the national forest. There's still a lot of land left to log, and more importantly, it leaves out the opinion of the people who actually live and work there, who can see beyond the false debate.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([18:10](#)):

My family have been loggers, they've been fishermen, they've been miners, and we need those things. When you do it at all costs, when you do it in a way where you deplete that resource beyond ever utilizing again, that's a problem.

Katharine Wilkinson ([18:31](#)):

Richard Peterson is the president of the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, one of the largest organized tribes in the state.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([18:40](#)):

My name is [foreign language 00:18:42]. That's my Tlingit name. My English name is Richard Peterson, and I'm the president of Tlingit and Haida, which is the largest of the 229 tribes in Alaska.

Katharine Wilkinson ([18:53](#)):

Richard told me that our national conversation about the Roadless Rule often misrepresents the actual issue at hand; that issue being our current model for rural economic development.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([19:05](#)):

I'm from rural Alaska. Industry comes in, usually brings folks from outside. Some of us benefit, but often we see outsiders benefit more than we do. Outsiders come from other states and other countries and get paid these exorbitant wages, and then our people get the low end of the scraps. It's our resources. We're an oil state. We're a resource extraction state. Most of the people benefiting aren't even Alaskans. We're not poor people. We don't come from poor places, but we've watched others come in and profit and prosper and take that wealth somewhere else.

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Leah Stokes ([19:49](#)):

This is a story of so many communities. It's an extractive story. I think about the cod fishery on the East Coast, where fishermen were paid cents on the dollar for the fish that they caught, while others further up the supply chain made huge profits. These communities are really exploited for their resources and their labor, including in really dangerous jobs, when others get the lion's share of the profit.

Katharine Wilkinson ([20:14](#)):

Yeah, this is sadly a story that has played out in different ways than so many rural communities, and you can understand why this issue that Richard's talking about is deeply emotional for many Alaskans, especially First Peoples of the region.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([20:29](#)):

The Roadless Rule came along, and very controversial in our region, because so many of our families were dependent on those resource extraction jobs. But I think the Roadless Rule is kind of this misleading thing anyways, because it didn't stop resource extraction. It was a more limited scope of saying, "We're not going to do roads here, we're going to pull out roads there." But on a very small scale, logging's still happening. Roads are still being built to mining projects. For me, the Roadless Rule was about a broken promise.

Katharine Wilkinson ([21:05](#)):

When the Roadless Rule first came out, it was a federal effort to say, "Look, logging has already happened over huge swaths of the Tongass, and some of the remaining areas are simply too valuable for other uses, like drinking water, like wildlife habitat." Let's stop logging in those places. But part of the deal was that the government would finally consult tribal nations on decisions about stewarding the forest and its resources.

Leah Stokes ([21:31](#)):

Right, because if we want to talk about self-governance, about sovereignty, then consultation is really the bare minimum.

Katharine Wilkinson ([21:39](#)):

And that aspect of consultation was overlooked for a long time, but we did hear about it when Trump and Alaska governor, Mike Dunleavy, had a little quickie, 20 minute confab on Air Force One a few years back. And they decided, those two

dudes, to exempt the Tongass from the Roadless Rule, and naturally they did that without conversation with the tribes. It was a huge insult and it was a blatant disregard for their sovereignty.

Leah Stokes ([22:09](#)):

Two aging White guys on a plane deciding what to do with forests that Native peoples have stewarded for thousands of years, this is just colonization 101. We're right back at square one. I can only imagine how people felt about that.

Katharine Wilkinson ([22:24](#)):

Yeah, folks were not happy. And Richard has a really important take, I think, about economic sovereignty being a critical part of indigenous sovereignty overall.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([22:36](#)):

You hear the word sovereignty thrown around a lot, because as tribes, we're constantly either having to defend it or push it, that we're sovereigns and we belong in the decision making process. But I talk about economic sovereignty, and my background is economic development. I've had people come up to me and, "Economic development? That doesn't seem like a very tribal priority or a tribal thing." And I think that's when people really don't know who we are. Our people have a history of commerce; trade, barter. Our culture gets romanticized, but I'll tell you, as we are stewards of the land and our resources thrived under our guidance and stewardship, we created commerce and we would kill over commerce. We fought battles and wars, as indigenous people of these lands, to protect resources, defend our resources, and the rights to trade and barter and all of that. I don't live in the past. We're healthy and thriving people today, and our commerce now is about creating jobs and opportunities for our citizens and our communities.

Katharine Wilkinson ([23:54](#)):

Leaders like Richard and Marina recognize that these jobs and opportunities do revolve around the Tongass' resources, so they're busy building a diverse regenerative economy; one that doesn't just rely on protections that are afforded by the Roadless Rule, one that doesn't rely on industrial resource extraction from the timber heyday and all the harms that come with it, one that keeps economic benefits circulating within communities, unlike this extract and export paradigm of the past, and one that envisions a bold new future for Southeast Alaska, creating a model for rural communities everywhere.

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Leah Stokes ([24:35](#)):

You've painted a picture for us, Katharine, of a region at a pivot point, a place that grew up with a forest and its peoples in reciprocal relation for thousands of years, that's looking towards the future for what can be built next. It's pretty exciting. It sounds pretty bold. I'm intrigued.

Katharine Wilkinson ([24:53](#)):

A pivot point is a great way to put it, and a big piece of this turn to a regenerative economy for the future is called the SASS, the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy. It's an initial \$25 million commitment from the USDA to Southeast Alaska.

Leah Stokes ([25:10](#)):

The SASS, wow, that's quite the name for a new policy.

Katharine Wilkinson ([25:14](#)):

It's not every day you get an acronym that good, and this program was developed under the leadership of the country's Secretary of Ag, Tom Vilsack, and it set in motion the process to overturn Trump's in the airplane, willy-nilly decision, and reinstate Roadless Rule protections for the Tongass.

Leah Stokes ([25:32](#)):

Oh, right. I think a lot of folks might have read about that in the news in January, when the Biden administration restored those protections to the Tongass, to more than 9 million acres of the forest. It was a really big win.

Katharine Wilkinson ([25:44](#)):

It is. A lot of Southeast Alaskans understand that the only way to protect the economy over time is to protect the forest, and that is where the SASS comes in, and I don't just mean being cheeky.

Leah Stokes ([25:57](#)):

You're not just being sassy?

Katharine Wilkinson ([26:00](#)):

I like to be sassy, but in this moment I'm just reporting the facts.

Leah Stokes ([26:04](#)):

Okay, good.

Katharine Wilkinson ([26:06](#)):

The idea for the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy sprouted from true collaboration between a ton of different groups in the community. The USDA, the Forest Service, which is an agency within the USDA, local nonprofits, residents, and most importantly, tribal governments.

Leah Stokes ([26:25](#)):

This is a big shift from how Trump and his USDA were handling the Tongass. It seems like the Biden administration is actually consulting and having those conversations that really should have been happening for decades.

Katharine Wilkinson ([26:38](#)):

From what I understand, Leah, it is a night and day difference. And I asked Richard when he first heard about this big idea, the SASS.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([26:47](#)):

I want to say it was almost a year-and-a-half ago, and again, Secretary Vilsack came and he was meeting with our tribes, he was meeting in the communities, and we had this idea like, again, talking about projects that need to be funded, that promote healthy tribes, promote healthy communities, things like traditional food security, those came up. That's when that sustainability kept being talked about is, "Hey, you could give us a grant here, but we need sustainability. You want to give us this responsibility, but you don't want to give us any money to carry it forward."

([27:23](#)):

And then they came back and said, "Okay, we have a plan. What do you think of this?" And honestly, it kind of put me back on my heels, working with the Forest Service, and I think the Forest Service was also trying to recover from being on the other side, where they were breaking those promises, and they really wanted to repair that. Some of these folks who had to carry that out, I think it broke them. I'm not even joking. I think in their personal lives, I watched grown men cry when I was like, "Why the hell did you break your word to us?"

Katharine Wilkinson ([27:53](#)):

And that was around the care of the forest specifically?

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Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([27:57](#)):

Yes, and the Roadless Rule, and breaking that promise. Now they're coming back and they're saying, "We want to honor these relationships. We know we need to invest in the region. We know we need to invest in communities that have lost the logging industry, that have lost all these resources, but we still have the Tongass and we still have the need to care for it and to really be stewards of it."

Katharine Wilkinson ([28:25](#)):

The SASS completely flips the way our federal government usually does rural economic development. It puts agency in the hands of local communities.

Leah Stokes ([28:36](#)):

Right. The typical, federal grant making process would involve tribes or other local organizations getting grant money, and then following the rules that the federal government has laid out for them. But that doesn't sound like how it worked in this case.

Katharine Wilkinson ([28:50](#)):

Yeah, rather than having Uncle Sam say, "This is what we want you to do, now follow these grant guidelines," with the SASS, the tribes and local orgs, they told the USDA what they want and need the money for, and the feds actually listened.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([29:08](#)):

They're changing their ways. They're championing stewardship, they're championing all of these initiatives to still be profitable, but to do it in ways that are regenerative and that are building up our communities, where our corporations, the federal government and the tribes, are working together. And we've never done that before.

Leah Stokes ([29:31](#)):

This sounds like a real C-change and a really promising program, but break it down for us a little more, Katharine. How is the USDA actually distributing this \$25 million?

Katharine Wilkinson ([29:42](#)):

Well, it's a pretty simple pie. About a quarter of that money will go towards much needed infrastructure and community workforce development. A second quarter is set aside for sustainable natural resource management, and then half of the money is for tribal governments and other organizations to fund work on things like food

security, art and culture, strengthening traditional knowledge and techniques in the forest.

Leah Stokes ([30:07](#)):

The big change here is that the tribes and the nonprofits, they get to distribute this money to the places and the project that they choose. Instead of having these grant requirements imposed on them, it sounds like the USDA is actually co-designing the process with the partners on the ground. It's much more of a collaboration. Is that right?

Katharine Wilkinson ([30:27](#)):

Precisely. And removing these bureaucratic, paternalistic obstacles helps communities get the funding they need, where they need it. Now, the SASS is pretty new, but it's already given a boost to quite a few existing programs. Marina actually works closely with some of these programs, The Indigenous Forest Partnerships, and the work that's happening is incredible.

Marina Anderson ([30:50](#)):

One of my favorite things to talk about and to really celebrate, here in Southeast Alaska, would be our forest partnerships that have our people out on the land, doing some habitat restoration and monitoring and mapping. With that, we're actually restoring a lot of these lands that we've devastated through the partnership. And through the partnership of tribal governments, environmental organization, the Forest Service, three key players that, 20 years ago, would never sit at the same table together. Not only that, but we're also providing these careers for our people, here in Southeast Alaska, that are meaningful, where they're able to be out on the land, and for some of our people, that's a way of really bringing back balance. Some of these people are people that their fathers and their family had participated heavily in the logging industry, and now they're making amends to the land essentially, by going back and properly restoring those spaces.

Leah Stokes ([32:03](#)):

This sounds so amazing and like a whole new paradigm. Marina is talking about a group, a program that is run by tribal entities, landowners, green groups, the Forest Service, and everybody's actually working together to try to restore the forest.

Katharine Wilkinson ([32:19](#)):

It's pretty cool. And Richard told me that he's also seen some exciting things with the SASS funding, including investment in local agriculture and food security, which as you can imagine, are big challenges in somewhere as remote as Southeast Alaska.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([32:35](#)):

You're starting to see small cottage industry companies start up. It's funny, I'm seeing some of these businesses start up and be supported by some of these initiatives. Barnacle Seafoods is a really neat one, where they go out and sustainably harvest kelp and they're making foods and really hitting that niche market. I'm a little nervous right now. We're seeing outside countries want to come in and do large scale kelp farming. That could be good, and I could be very supportive of it, but I want to make sure that it's locally driven. That if some Scandinavian company wants to come over here and put in a kelp farm, take all the resources, then I'm not for it. If they want to come in and be partners and build something that's regenerative and locals will equally benefit, then yeah, let's do that. Let's have those conversations.

Katharine Wilkinson ([33:33](#)):

You get a sense, Leah, that the potential for the SASS is huge, and so is the potential for a broader regenerative economy in Southeast Alaska. Leaders like Richard are committed to ensuring that the benefits of that kind of economy actually accrue to local communities, and local communities, most of all.

Leah Stokes ([33:51](#)):

That would really change the experience for a rural area like Southeast Alaska. And the cool thing here is that it's an experiment that's happening in one place, but once it starts to work, it's the kind of thing that can be like a template, that can be moved to other communities to have a similar kind of impact.

Katharine Wilkinson ([34:10](#)):

Absolutely, and I think that's another reason the SASS is so exciting. But it's also important to understand that it took a lot of deep hard work to get to this moment, and it's work that might need to happen for the template to take root successfully in other regions.

Leah Stokes ([34:25](#)):

Right, I imagine you actually need folks on the ground who are pushing to change the system, if you actually want to make this kind of model work in other places.

Katharine Wilkinson ([34:34](#)):

Definitely. We mentioned the collective impact network that Marina helps lead, the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, or SSP. It's basically a group of local people and organizations who come together and hash out solutions for their community. And as you might imagine, that takes a lot of groundwork and relationship building.

Marina Anderson ([34:55](#)):

We had tribal governments who didn't want anything to do with environmental organizations in the region and didn't want anything to do with the forest service, and the environmental groups didn't want anything to do with the Forest Service either, and we were all just fighting with each other and not really agreeing on the future of the Tongass and Southeast Alaska. The Sustainable Southeast Partnership was born as a way to get those basically fighting family members together and realize, "Hey, look, we might be fighting, but if we decide to focus on this one area where we agree, and put our resources into that and put our effort and our sweat into that, we'll start to make a positive change."

Katharine Wilkinson ([35:47](#)):

I imagine some of our listeners might think, "Oh my God, my family can't even get through a holiday meal without having something fall apart." How does it work, in practice, to keep this unlikely group of allies working together?

Marina Anderson ([36:09](#)):

Yeah, my family can't make it through a holiday meal either, but we always make it to dessert. We're going to have pie, so we stick around for it. Part of what makes the SSP really work is the fact that we've been doing it for over a decade now. We have that established relationship and we have that trust. And the way that we got to that was not easy. We had to have tough conversations. We had to have conversations about the impacts of the boom and bust economy. We had to have conversations about what colonization has done for indigenous people in Southeast Alaska. Fighting through those conversations for years, and continuing to show up over and over again, even though you know it's not going to be a beautiful topic, is what has been a pillar for the SSP. Our motto is that we operate at the speed of trust.

Katharine Wilkinson ([37:06](#)):

And the speed of trust is often glacial. That pace can be hard to stomach when challenges are so pressing. When a yellow cedar but has been alive for a millennium can be lost in a matter of moments.

Leah Stokes ([37:19](#)):

Right! On the one hand, we've got the forest to protect and climate change to address, and on the other hand, we've got relationships to build. And these two things, their timelines and pace, they can clash.

Katharine Wilkinson ([37:32](#)):

They absolutely can. But I think one thing we see over and over again in the work of climate transformation is that when you take the time, and this persistent pressure happens over years, it can lead to big shifts, seismic even.

Leah Stokes ([37:50](#)):

Totally. That's what we've seen with Justice 40, all these groups pushing for years to make that a reality. We saw it with the Inflation Reduction Act, groups pushing for climate action at the federal level. We know that this pressure can change things.

Katharine Wilkinson ([38:06](#)):

And this kind of building pressure is what Marina and Richard are seeing in Southeast Alaska too. With the work of the SSP Collective, now with the SASS program, when you're willing to go slow and steady and keep at it, many more people eventually jump on board.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([38:24](#)):

I don't think I'm bold, but people say I do and say bold things. I was back in DC and I said, "SASS agreement's going to be the new wave of the future and you guys need to put more money towards it, because we're going to be successful." Now, we just started, so I got to put my money where my mouth is, but we have to be successful. But how can you not be when it's locally driven? When you have projects the locals want and you fund them, how can that fail? We could probably spend all day talking about how it can fail, but let's talk about how we make it succeed. I think building this Sustainable Southeast Partnership, our Guardians program, are going to shepherd these things. We're in this together in a way we've never been before. We're collaborating and networking and, I think, holding each other accountable, calling each other out and holding each other up, and that's a new way of doing business.

(39:19):

And when you have tribes and the feds and the corporations all doing that, holding each other accountable and being honest like, "Hey, this sucks. That's a dumb idea. This is a great idea." You need to be able to say those honest things without it being accusatory or hurtful. I'm working on that, but I think you can, and I think we can hold each other accountable, and I think that our tribes in Southeast, our corporations and the government, the missing piece, in my mind, is the state of Alaska. And we can point the finger and say, "They're not here," or we can reach out the hand and say, "Come on in." And I think we got to figure out that piece.

Leah Stokes (40:04):

These advocates, they're making a lot of progress, but the Alaska government, they're still not quite aboard the SASS train yet, but there's still time and the project is moving forward anyway, so perhaps they'll start to come around.

Katharine Wilkinson (40:17):

The train is definitely moving, and that is because people like Marina and Richard kept at it, and they've been painting a picture of possibility for the region for so long. And even when Trump exempted the Tongass from the Roadless Rule, even when COVID demolished Southeast Alaska's tourism, they kept moving forward. And now they've built something that could actually reimagine rural economic development everywhere.

Marina Anderson (40:45):

If we continue to operate in Southeast Alaska, the way that we've started to operate with the Sustainable Southeast Partnership, I don't think that there's much for us to worry about, because that just means that we're going to keep bringing together the people that have been at odds, but also the people that have some of the best ideas and resources to be able to provide a sustainable economy and environment for everybody to thrive in. We'll continue to be a model for other regions in the state and for other regions in the world, around our collaboration style and our communication methods as well, and the way that we share our resources together.

Katharine Wilkinson (41:30):

Let's zoom out of it and see the Tongass Forest for the trees, shall we? Because the SASS is a lot like the forest. All of its components, things like trust, communication,

tribal governments, federal government, economy, environment, they're all parts of a single, whole, functioning system. If you take one thing out, the rest would suffer.

Leah Stokes ([41:52](#)):

Right, we can think of our governance system like an ecosystem, and that allows us to start envisioning a future where everybody is part of the solution.

Katharine Wilkinson ([42:02](#)):

Exactly. The story of the Tongass is very much still being written, but you can feel something so powerful taking root in Southeast Alaska; something that has significance for all of us living through this era of climate crisis and our collective prospects for climate healing.

Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson ([42:21](#)):

When we see the federal government supporting and investing in these things like the SASS, I understand that Alaska's the canary. We're the last vestige and we're hurting. It matters to Middle America, Eastern America. If any part of you is not healthy, it's like cancer. And so you have to take care of what you want to take care of you. The planet, the land, is that body and it's the resource. We're symbiotic. When we talk about the trees of the Tongass, I feel like I have those roots into the ground, into the dirt, into the rocks, that the trees do. I belong to these lands and I have a responsibility to take care of these lands.

([43:12](#)):

And when you don't see that connection, when you don't understand that connection, you can do a lot of harm to the land, not recognizing the harm you're doing to yourself. We need the allies and we need folks to support this, that when we see President Biden get up on stage and say, "Hey, we have communities eroding and we're going to invest money in relocating communities and supporting these communities. It's needed." When they say, "We believe in co-stewardship and we want the First People to be a part of this solution," because we are part of the answer.

Marina Anderson ([43:56](#)):

It's really important for people to understand that it's not just the Tongass that's important here in Southeast Alaska. It's not just the animals that are in the Tongass that's important. It's not just the Indigenous people that are important. It's everything that makes our ecosystem and our environment here work with each other that is important. And I'm talking about the health of our kelp beds, the health of the oceans,

the health of the rivers. The core lesson from the Tongass is to live in balance with the environment that's around us. Never take more than you need. Always be sure to give back what you can, and to make sure that everything that you're doing in the area is with good intention. And that good intention should be something that you're hoping to leave for the eighth generation that's coming after you.

Katharine Wilkinson ([45:03](#)):

The Tongass is where we wanted to end this season of A Matter of Degrees, because it's a perfect metaphor for how we see the climate space.

Leah Stokes ([45:11](#)):

The climate movement is a complex ecosystem that thrives because of its diversity.

Katharine Wilkinson ([45:16](#)):

And we've seen lots of glimpses of that diversity in yet another season full of stories, solutions, voices, and visions for the future. Some are political, others, economic, environmental, or deeply personal.

Leah Stokes ([45:29](#)):

And to understand the climate problem and its solution, we need all of these lenses. We need all this action, because our actions collectively, they can change the temperature by a matter of degrees. And what we do now, it matters.

Katharine Wilkinson ([45:45](#)):

It matters to rein in crypto's climate problems, stop the petrochemical build out, and fund justice for frontline communities.

Leah Stokes ([45:53](#)):

It matters to hold corporations accountable for their pollution, its impacts and their pledges to do better.

Katharine Wilkinson ([45:59](#)):

It matters to take professional and political action and allow yourself to feel your climate feels.

Leah Stokes ([46:05](#)):

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And it matters if you take the time to learn about what your money's doing while you sleep, or research heat pumps for your house.

Katharine Wilkinson ([46:13](#)):

Sidebar, if you've learned nothing else this season, up with heat pumps, down with carbon. Literally, down, keep it underground.

Leah Stokes ([46:22](#)):

This is a heat pump promotion podcast. That's what this is at this point.

Katharine Wilkinson ([46:27](#)):

So far, no money has been made.

Leah Stokes ([46:29](#)):

No, \$0. But everything that we all do together, it matters. And please let us know how this show has impacted you. Our listener survey, it's still open, and there's a link to it in the show notes.

Katharine Wilkinson ([46:42](#)):

While the podcast takes a little bit of hibernation time, three dozen episodes, and all the additional resources that we've got in the show notes, it's all here for you to meander through and to harvest sustainably.

Leah Stokes ([46:54](#)):

And we'll be plugging away at our own climate work, and we hope that you'll do the same, in whatever way you're able. Send your roots down into a place where the soil fills right and dig in.

Katharine Wilkinson ([47:06](#)):

There's a whole ecosystem of people beside you doing exactly the same. Like a single Sitka spruce tree in the Tongass, we are each a node of aliveness and possibility, connected with so many others.

Leah Stokes ([47:24](#)):

A Matter of Degrees is co-hosted by me, Dr. Leah Stokes.

Katharine Wilkinson ([47:29](#)):

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And me, Dr. Katharine Wilkinson.

Leah Stokes ([47:31](#)):

We are a production made in partnership with Frequency Media, the 2035 Initiative at UC Santa Barbara, and the All We Can Save Project.

Katharine Wilkinson ([47:40](#)):

Thanks to our funders and supporters who make this show possible; Energy Foundation, Northlight Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and the 11th Hour Project. Deep gratitude to the Sitka Conservation Society, especially Deputy Director Katie Riley, for bringing me to the Tongass to learn about this story firsthand, and for linking arms on making this episode.

Leah Stokes ([48:02](#)):

If you're digging the show, please hop on Apple Podcasts or Spotify and give us a five star rating or leave us a review. Jordan Rizzieri is our producer. Katherine Devine and Emily Krumberger are our associate producers. Ina Garcucia is our supervising producer, and Michelle Corey is our executive producer.

Katharine Wilkinson ([48:22](#)):

William Kegel and Allie Katz wrote the script.

Leah Stokes ([48:24](#)):

And Isabel Moncola-Daley, Becca Godwin, and Jessica Olivier are script editors.

Katharine Wilkinson ([48:30](#)):

Matthew Ernest Filler is our lead audio engineer, mixer and sound designer, with dialogue editing and additional mixing by Claire Vitigare-Curtis, and session engineering by Dante Hodge.

Leah Stokes ([48:41](#)):

Rose Wong designed our new show art. Sean Markwan composed our theme song. Additional music came from Blue Dot Sessions.

Katharine Wilkinson ([48:48](#)):

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Soundscapes for this episode came from Liz McKenzie of Encounters North. Research, fact-checking, communication and production support by Daniella Schulman, Amerachi Metu, Kristin Palmstrom, and Madeline Jubilee-Sito.

Leah Stokes ([49:01](#)):

Find us online at degreespod.com, and [@Degreespod](#) on Twitter.

Katharine Wilkinson ([49:06](#)):

And cheers to another great season of stories for the climate curious.