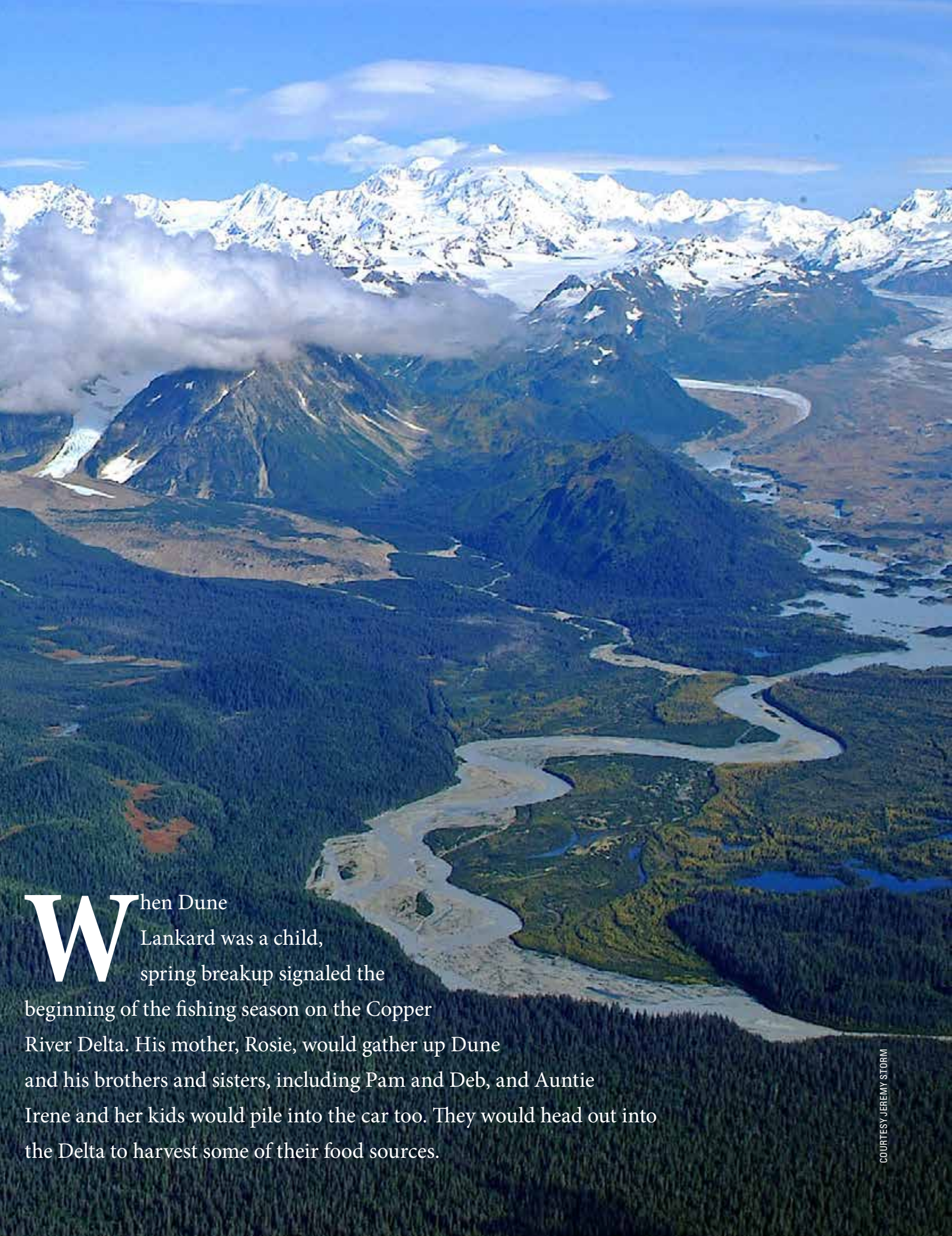


An aerial photograph of a vast Alaskan coalfield. The landscape is dominated by dark green coniferous forests in the foreground and middle ground, interspersed with patches of brown and tan earth. In the background, majestic mountains rise, their peaks and ridges covered in snow and partially shrouded in white mist or low clouds. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue. The overall scene conveys a sense of natural grandeur and wilderness.

Saving serenity

**Grassroots effort aims to protect
vast Alaska coalfield from development**

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BY MELISSA DEVAUGHN



When Dune Lankard was a child, spring breakup signaled the beginning of the fishing season on the Copper River Delta. His mother, Rosie, would gather up Dune and his brothers and sisters, including Pam and Deb, and Auntie Irene and her kids would pile into the car too. They would head out into the Delta to harvest some of their food sources.



COURTESY WILL SAUNDERS

Dune Lankard operates his gillnet bowpicker outside of Cordova. A lifelong resident of the Copper River Delta, and shareholder of the Chugach Alaska Corp., Lankard has for the past 20 years fought for the conservation of the Bering River coalfields.

“Even though spring breakup was underway, there would still be snow patches on the ground; it was cold, and the air was alive with scents of a new season,” said Lankard, an Eyak Athabaskan who has lived his whole life in the Delta. “We knew spring and summer fishing was around the corner.”

The stark beauty of Lankard’s ancestral homelands made him feel safe – he knew that through the bounty of the land and sea that his family would be fed and they would be OK. They’d drive out on the Delta until eagles flying overhead would give away the presence of fish, then Dune and his siblings would gather driftwood for a fire and set up camp by the riverbank.

“Mom would have her iron skillet ready,” he said. “All us children would huddle around the fire in our blankets and sleeping bags to stay warm, watching Mom wade out into the river with a small mesh dip net to catch the early run of hooligan (smelt) that would come home by the millions to the Copper River Delta every spring.”

The land and waters about which Lankard speaks is part of the fabric of his life. The Copper River Delta has been home to the Eyak people for the past 3,500 years. Lankard spent his childhood enjoying this routine and he can’t imagine this place ever being any different.

“Mom would fill a 5-gallon bucket with these beautiful oil-rich fish, which were like tiny tasty torpedoes of energy to us kids,” he said. “My older sister Pam and I would gut the tiny fish, then Mom would put the iron skillet on the hot fire and fill it with hooligan, and like little chicks with our mouths open, we knew in moments we would all be eating like kings and queens.”

Memories like these are why for the past 20 years, Lankard and the Eyak Preservation Council have advocated for the protection of the Copper River Delta – particularly a stretch of coal-harboring wilderness known as the Bering River coalfields. Located 55 miles southeast of Cordova and bordered by the Martin River Glacier on one side and the Bering Glacier and River on the other, the coalfield stands on the edge of lands already protected under easements of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustees Council. Private interests, who could on any given day decide to develop the land, own it.

That would be disastrous, Lankard argues. Nowhere is there a more

pristine habitat, critical to shorebirds, salmon and other wildlife. The land is most valuable, he argues, not by being mined beyond recognition, but by remaining a vital ecosystem supporting such natural and renewable resources as wild salmon, herring and hooligan.

“The reason that this region deserves permanent protection is that it is still 98 percent roadless and wild,” Lankard said. “It is an intact, thriving wild salmon watershed that is a baseline for how other watersheds should be managed. ... This is one of the last intact, wild places on earth where we still have a chance to get it right.”

FIGHTING FOR FUNDING

In early November, the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustees Council met in Anchorage. Lankard and Tim Richardson, government affairs representative of Wildlife Forever, were there to speak. Calling in by teleconference were other supporters, including Carol Hoover, executive director of the Eyak Preservation Council, and even internationally known conservationist Jane Goodall, whose recorded message backed the request that was to come: Would the EVOS Trustee Council help out? Could it extend its restoration boundaries to include the eastern Copper River Delta, pairing it forever to the already protected Prince William Sound?

Now is the time to act, they argued. With a new administration set to take over in Washington, D.C., and the current landowners showing a willingness to sell, the opportunity should not be missed. If passed up, the Bering River coalfields could be in limbo indefinitely.

But unanimous support was not to come. The Council heard the comments and did indeed take them into consideration, said EVOS executive director Elise Hsieh.

“The Council has reviewed the unsolicited proposals for Bering River habitat protection,” she explained in an email. “It is my understanding that there is not general Council support for pursuing this proposal at this time.”

The rationale, she said, is that the Council already has current projects to consider within its existing designated spill area, and taking on new projects would create competition and new paperwork as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

“Those conditions are OK with us,” argued Richardson.

Hsieh did not flat-out reject the request – in fact, she said, her job is to help facilitate the wishes of the Council, not to make such decisions on her own.

“If the Council as a whole is supportive of expanding habitat purchases beyond the spill area, it would be a major new initiative for the habitat program,” she added.

That small window gives Richardson, Lankard, Hoover and others hope. This coal deposit has a long history of people fighting to protect it, and they’ve had setbacks before. This is yet another hurdle, they argue, and one they are determined to successfully overcome.

A HISTORY OF A FARAWAY PLACE

So, who are the owners of this coal-rich land that also happens to be one of the most precious ecosystems in the world, and how have they managed to keep hold of such a treasure?

The story is convoluted but begins in 1906 with then-President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, the first U.S. Forest Service chief. Roosevelt and Pinchot moved the Chugach National Forest boundary line eastward to include the Bering River coalfields. The goal? To protect the land from coal mining by the JP Morgan-Guggenheim Alaska Syndicate. The rich-in-coal region would have provided coal to fuel the Copper River railroad, which was running from the Kennecott Copper Mine in McCarthy to Cordova. But Roosevelt and Pinchot wanted the land to stay pristine.

For many years, that is exactly what happened. But with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, the newly formed Chugach Alaska Corp. claimed the 73,000-acre Bering River coalfields as part of the 1982 Chugach Settlement Agreement.

Then the land came under threat of development again. Now the corporation could do what it liked with the land, so when a South Korean corporation called the Korea Alaska Development Corp. expressed interest in developing the westernmost bituminous coal tracts, Chugach Alaska Corp. formed a partnership to develop the coalfields. After the 1991 bankruptcy reorganization by Chugach Alaska, they transferred 11,000 acres of subsurface coalfields to KADCO.

“Therefore, this South Korean corporation owns outright one of the only subsurface coal titles outside of the United States,” said Hoover, with the Eyak Preservation Council. “KADCO aggressively wanted to mine the coal in the late 1990s, when coal was still very much in demand, as it still is in Asia today.”

In 1997, the conservation community caught wind of KADCO’s plan to build an exploratory road through the Delta to access the coalfields. The demonstrations were swift and effective, with local and Lower 48 activists arriving to protest the development.

“It became the first nonviolent environmental direct action in Alaska, when six people (including one Chugach shareholder and a local commercial fisherman) chained themselves to bridge-pieces that were planned to be placed on Clear Creek in the first 1.5 miles of road,” Hoover said.

In the end, though, the Chugach Alaska Corp. was not swayed so much by demonstrators as they were the financial burden.

“The Chugach Alaska Corp. tried to begin building the road across the Copper River Delta to access its private ANCSA inholdings, but realized that it would cost tens of millions of dollars,” Lankard said. “Then there is the huge cost of building the infrastructure to safely remove the resources and the cost to get the resources to market. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that it makes no economic sense to undevelop an already highly developed thriving ecosystem.”

With the road project on hold but developers still eager to see if extraction was feasible, the fight moved to Washington, D.C., where a “Chugach Road Rider” was attached to an appropriations funding bill in 1999.

Again, Hoover said, the fight heated up: The road rider should not pass without state and federal environmental clearance, opponents argued. No environmental impact statement, environmental assessment or restoration bond had been conducted, and without these safety measures in place, there should be no road.

“We managed to get our plea all the way to President Clinton, who deleted the road rider over the weekend before the vote on the bill,” Hoover said. “There has not been an effort to build a road across the Delta to the coalfields since 1998.”

Kati Capozzi, Alaska Resource Development Council, said its group can’t speak directly to the Bering River coalfields, but its mission remains to support Alaska’s economic growth through responsible resource development.

“We support the expansion and increased production for deposits as well as new exploration of Alaska’s vast mineral resources,” she said. “Access and infrastructure, or lack thereof, is indeed a great challenge in Alaska, and RDC advocates for increased access to *and* across public lands for resource and community.”

STILL IN LIMBO

Today, the Bering River Coalfields remain under ownership of Chugach Alaska Corp. and the Korea Alaska Development Corp.,

By the numbers: Bering River Coalfields



COURTESY EYAK PRESERVATION COUNCIL

1896: Coalfields discovered by oil and gas prospectors.

73,000: Number of acres, owned by Chugach Alaska Corp.

11,000: Number of acres of subsurface coalfields, owned by Korea Alaska Development Corp.

59 MILLION: Minimum number of metric tons of coal deposits in the region; it could be as much as 3 billion metric tons.

20 MILLION: The number of shorebirds and waterfowl that migrate annually through the Copper River Delta.

19.13 MILLION: The 2016 commercial salmon harvest in the Copper River Delta and Prince William Sound (Area E).

9,500: The number of acres of old-growth spruce and hemlock in the Bering River coalfields.

— Melissa DeVaughn

but and Lankard and Richardson say both corporations are open to selling the land with a conservation goal. Despite the vast amounts of high-quality coal that is thought to be in the region – estimates range from 59 million metric tons to 3 billion metric tons – access to it is difficult and would be immensely costly to harvest.

In a video to its shareholders, released in 2016, CEO Gabriel Kompkoff stressed the organization's responsibility to develop resources for the best gain for its shareholders. Chugach Alaska knows the coal is there and it knows it has value, but does the value of the coal override the value of preserving the land so such natural resources such as salmon and birds can thrive?

“Rather than developing that coal through our firm we are looking to sell it to realize the value,” he said in the video. “For Chugach we intend to be around forever, and so the ideal buyer for us is the buyer that has the same value system as Chugach, a buyer that has a balanced approach to the ownership of a resource like this.”

Josie Hickel, senior vice president of energy services for Chugach Commercial Holdings, says the old-growth forest makes it “an ideal area for a potential carbon project,” to cut greenhouse gases.

“That’s another one of the opportunities we have identified should we choose to go with a conservation easement on the property,” she said in the video.

The Korea Alaska Development Corp. also has shown a willingness to sell. In at least two documents signed by its chairman, Joo



COURTESY EYAK PRESERVATION COUNCIL.

Korea Alaska Development Corp. chairman Joo Shin has indicated a willingness to sell its portion of the Bering River coalfields.

Shin, the company has agreed to work with such nonprofits as the Pinchot Institute for Conservation and the Native Conservancy Land Trust to sell the land with an ultimate goal of conservation.

“He remains at the table as a willing seller,” Richardson said.

Lankard, who is also a shareholder of the Chugach Alaska Corp., and Hoover say that those who want to see conservation in the region should reach out to the Eyak Preservation Council to become part of a capital fundraising coalition to protect the area.

“It would be just terrific for the nation if this area was protected,” said Theodore Roosevelt IV, a conservationist who would love to see his great-grandfather’s vision realized. “You are talking about a salmon resource that would just be destroyed if you tried to exploit

the coal resources that are out there, and it’s not worth it.”

For now, the Bering River coalfields do indeed remain in limbo. With a new president on the horizon who has said he supports reviving the coal industry, but with coal-pollution in Asia creating life-threatening conditions, it remains to be seen if there will ever be enough demand to offset the cost of extraction to the value of the natural ecosystem as it stands today.

“Wildlife Forever believes that we can get this deal done,” Richardson said. “Even with Trump, we could do this deal,” Richardson said. “We are not despairing that we didn’t get it done under Obama.”

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