

Conservation group seeks Buskin land

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The **American Land Conservancy** (ALC) is seeking funds from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council and other grants to acquire 743 acres of land along Rezanof Drive near the Buskin River State Recreation Site and Margaret (Boy Scout) Lake. The San Francisco-based nonprofit hopes to eventually make the area into an easily accessible, public land parcel that exemplifies Exxon Valdez oil spill restoration dollars at work, said Tim Richardson, director of government affairs for the ALC and former executive director of the Kodiak Brown Bear Trust.

The acreage belongs to Natives of Kodiak Inc., which acquired the land in 1989 under terms in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The organization later master-planned the area for a mixed-use subdivision of residential homes and commercial property. However, the acreage — called the Shoonami Subdivision by the Natives of Kodiak, Shoonami being derivative of the Alutiiq word Sun'ami, meaning "at/in Kodiak" — and much of the area around it were found to be contaminated by debris and chemicals from World War II-era military activity.

As early as 1995, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began removing various leftovers in the tens of thousands of tons from land belonging to the organizations like Natives of Kodiak, the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Coast Guard. Chemical contaminants found in the soil included trichloroethylene (TCE), polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), petroleum, diesel fuel and asphalt. Debris found included lead-acid batteries, tank sludge, drums, petroleum-contaminated wood and transformers, according to a fall 2008 Army Corps of Engineers Alaska district fact sheet.

Though Shoonami is privately owned, Natives of Kodiak has permitted public pedestrian access, the organization's president and CEO Tony Drabek said.

It's no mystery why various hikers have been exploring the area: Shoonami features dramatic coastal rainforest cliffs and, like Fort Abercrombie State Historical Park, World War II-era structures.

The ecological description of the vegetation at Shoonami is a northern temperate rainforest, said Kodiak environmentalist and botanist Stacy Studebaker. She said experts consider it a young forest — less than 500 years old.

Management possibilities

If the ALC is able to acquire the land with Exxon Valdez money, management of the 743 acres could possibly be split between the Kodiak Island Borough and the state or federal government.

The borough could take the hilly upland side, while Alaska State Parks or the federal government acquires coastal areas.

Any kind of future borough management would require a considerable vetting process, said Bud Cassidy, borough community development department director. He said the area could be used for public recreation and open space.

"We're a long way from signing on the dotted line. We're just considering looking at ownership," Cassidy said.

The Borough Assembly would be involved for final approval, which also would include the borough carefully considering the effects of the World War II contaminants and debris found there, Cassidy said.

Kevin Murphy, Alaska State Parks' district ranger for all of Kodiak, said the state's acquisition of portions of the Shoonami land would be good for a variety of reasons, including its proximity to the Buskin River State Recreation Site.

"We think it would make a wonderful park," Murphy said. "It's got an old road system that could easily be converted into a trail system. It practically is a trail system now because it's gotten overgrown ... and so, when opportunities come along like this that have potential, if it's something that's an expansion of a current park, we're all for it. We're on board with it."

Murphy said Shoonami's "old gun turrets, old bunkers ... could be developed, protected and interpreted, which is like what we do."

He also said the area could also be good for future mountain biking events, something not allowed at Fort Abercrombie.

Murphy said the dilemma, however, is a question of manpower.

Acquiring the land "fits into what our mission statement is. The problem, of course, is we don't currently have enough staff to continue to take on additional properties."

Current funding might also not allow for immediate work to be done on preserving and interpreting the World War II structures there, if the land is acquired.

"We like to try to think maybe a generation down the road, maybe the state parks will be funded to the level we like them to be," Murphy said, adding that the state could not currently afford to purchase the land on its own without ALC's help.

Any kind of land acquisition opportunity, though, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not to be missed, he added.

"If you pass it up when it becomes available, it winds up something else — housing development, retail real estate. It could be anything."

Payback for the spill

Richardson said if the land is purchased from Natives of Kodiak, it will be the best and most easily accessible example of land the settlement money of the Exxon Valdez oil spill (EVOS) — which recently reached its 20th anniversary Tuesday, March 24 — sought to protect. Though the Shoonami ocean-front acres did not likely have Exxon Valdez-spilled oil reach them, various species residing throughout Shoonami, and the surrounding areas, were severely affected or killed by the spill in other regions of Alaska.

"What I really like about the property ... is that (everyone will) be able to go into that property with their car, or on foot, and see the ecosystem that the Exxon Valdez restoration plan was designed to protect," Richardson said. "They'll see a rainforest, they'll see nesting areas for marbled murrelet, they'll see bald eagle nesting. They'll be able to experience what the settlement was all about, five minutes out of the airport."

He said the land could "become pretty famous as a draw to Kodiak to come see the ecosystem up close and personal ... as opposed to having to get in a floatplane and go out down to the southern end of Kodiak (Island) or the northern end of Afognak," to other EVOS restoration project areas.

Richardson also has applied for money for Shoonami from the Forest Legacy Fund. That grant effort failed to make Forest Legacy's top two and be in the running for money, but he said he will nonetheless apply again this year because the end goal would prove worthwhile

"For a lot of people, coming to Alaska is a once-in-a-lifetime achievement," Richardson said. "Then to be able to go into that forest and have these towering Sitka spruce above you, to realize that it's yours now — you the public and payback for the spill — I think it's going to be a rewarding experience for a long time to come for many generations."

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