

NEW WAYS TO LIVE

Like streams feeding a river, people along the Kenai have become tributaries to this Alaska watershed's future.

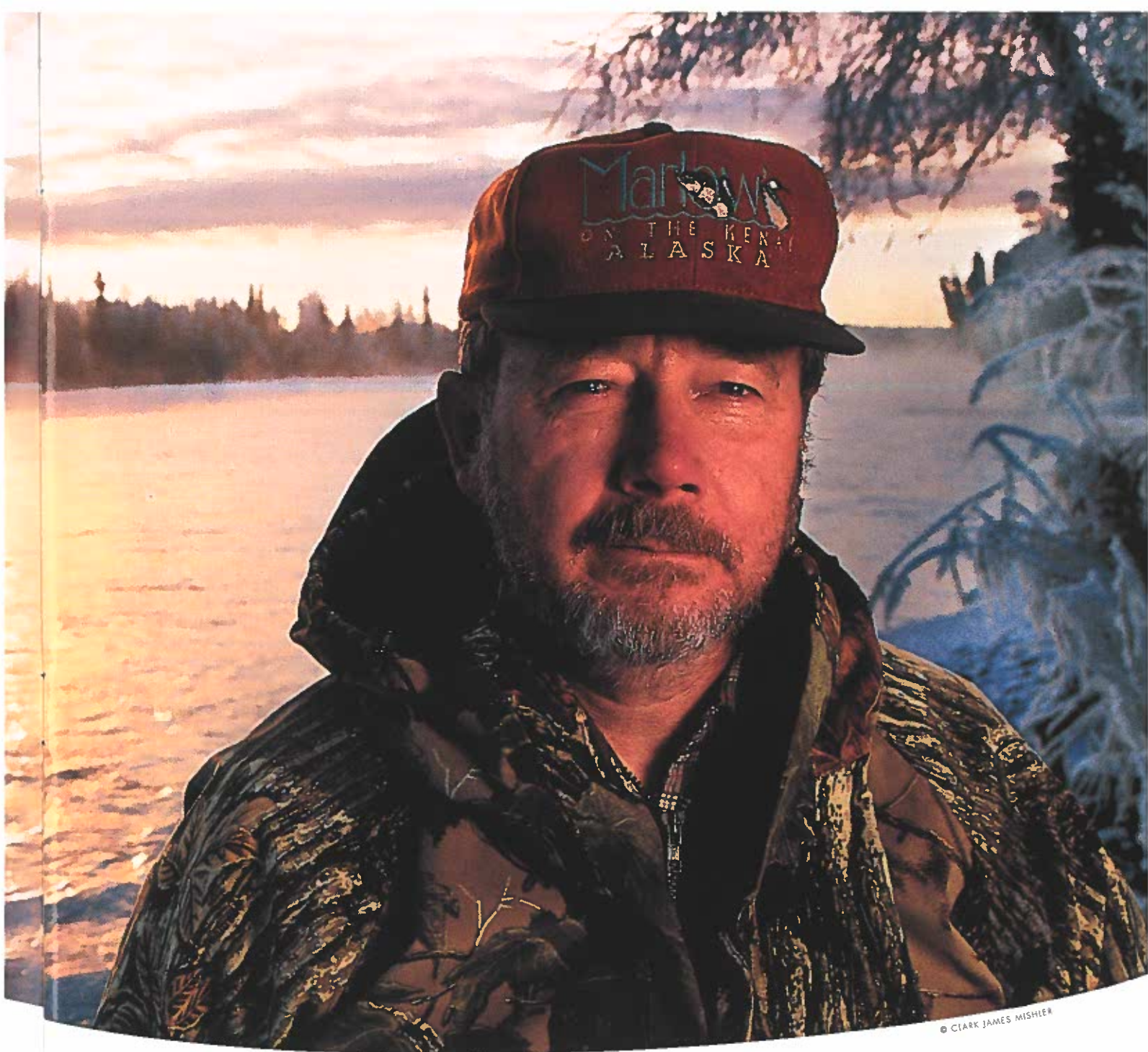
BY MARYBETH HOLLEMAN

The boat drifts downriver over blue-green water whose iridescence mirrors the sky. It's mid-May on Alaska's Kenai River, and the only sounds are of birds. An arctic tern wafts by, its white belly reflecting the water's blue. Trumpeter swans glide in eddies, their ko-ho's echoing off the riverbanks. A bald eagle sits on a nest; its mate perches nearby, then swoops to the opposite bank, returning with talons full of moss to soften the nest. A chorus of songbirds—ruby-crowned kinglet, white-crowned sparrow, red-breasted nuthatch—fills the newly leafing aspen lining the banks. Along the river are signs of other wildlife: beaver

lodges, gray wolf scat, lynx tracks and deep forests where black and brown bears live.

"People always remark on the quiet," says Ken Marlow, a river guide who has lived on the Kenai Peninsula for more than 20 years. He and his wife, Judy, both taught school in Alaska bush communities before settling in beside the Kenai River in south-central Alaska. Today, he and a couple from Florida float the middle section of river from Skilak Lake to Naptowne Rapids. At first, the problems aren't evident.

Then, a few miles downstream, houses appear on the



banks—first a few, then entire subdivisions. While the waters are still void of other boats, Marlow says that in July, along this 12-mile stretch, “you’d see at least 50 boats.” He points to the half-dozen ways people have tried to keep their piece of riverbank from eroding away. Some, like the large boulders and cement walls, have so changed current speed and flow dynamics that they cause erosion farther downstream and make it difficult for salmon fry to stay near shore.

“A lot of people want to do the right thing,” says Marlow, “but the right thing keeps changing.”

From Kenai Lake, the Kenai River flows 25 miles, fed by more than a dozen streams tumbling from the glaciers of the Sargent Icefield. In its upper reaches, the river charges downhill at more than seven miles per hour, churns through a canyon hundreds of feet deep and spills into Skilak Lake. It is pure glacial meltwater whose heavy sediments fall out in Kenai Lake to leave just the right amount of suspended glacial flour in the river to create a color unequaled in the natural world. From Skilak, the river widens and slows. The Killey River adds its muddy brown water; the Funny adds its tea-colored tannic waters

KENAI RIVER COMMUNITIES



Alaskans like river guide Ken Marlow [previous pages] are trading in some of their fierce independence to work together to protect the Kenai River watershed. ▼ Sockeye salmon choke the Kenai en route to their spawning grounds.

from spruce forests. The river meanders, flanked by oxbow lakes and canals left by course changes. It U-turns again and again, becoming sluggish as it opens into Cook Inlet, where high tide reaches 12 miles upriver, mixing salt and fresh water into a complex estuarine world.

The accumulating ecological complexity of the Kenai River as it moves downstream mirrors the human communities. In the upper river, the few hundred residents of Moose Pass and Cooper Landing have no industry save a bit of tourism, and people are retired or independently employed. As the river flows northwest, past Sterling, Funny River and Soldotna, to this economic mix is added sportfishing, government and tourism. With 4,000 residents, Soldotna is the business center of the Kenai Peninsula. Finally, where it reaches the town of Kenai at the mouth of Cook Inlet, all this combines with commercial fishing and oil drilling and refining. With the accumulated mix of economies comes the inevitable:

increasingly diverse reasons for and ways of living along the river.

The character of many who live here is marked by independence commingled with a mistrust of government and resistance to regulation. Remnants of the wild frontier are resurrected in public meetings. At a planning meeting in Cooper Landing, one old-timer beat up another so badly he landed in the emergency room. Until recently, zoning was referred to only as "the z word"; no one dared bring it up at Kenai Peninsula Borough meetings. "It's an Alaskan attitude," says Dale Bondurant, a resident since 1950. "We don't want anyone else telling us



what to do." As in much of rural Alaska, people moved here to live unrestricted lives.

It's the wilderness, too, that attracts. "These are people that speak with pride if they're late because a moose was in their path," says Dan Pitt of his neighbors. Pitt's story is a common one: He moved here 25 years ago after a city childhood marked by his parents' yearnings to move to Alaska. "Loons nest on the lake, moose sleep in my yard, eagles nest in the spruce trees. I love it here; I can't leave."

Spread along the river, these Alaskans are realizing that if they want to protect their wilderness-imbued lifestyle, they may have to give up a bit of independence. They are uniting to protect the river running through all their lives, which provides not only food for the table but, as one resident put it, food for the soul as well.

When The Nature Conservancy opened an Alaska office in 1988, staff quickly recognized the exceptional biological diversity of the Kenai River watershed. The 82-mile-long river is one of the world's richest in salmon. Four species of Pacific salmon, including the largest of the king salmon, live in its waters. The 1.4-million-acre watershed—almost twice the size of Yosemite—contains 37 species of fish, among them trophy-sized rainbow trout. It is home to 100 kinds of birds, including 21 species of waterfowl. It supports important populations of brown and black bears, wolves, lynx, caribou and moose.

But, says Susan Ruddy, director of the Alaska office, "It was clear in Kenai, as in much of Alaska, that simply buying land would not accomplish our mission." Only 0.3 percent of the land in Alaska is in individual private ownership. Of the rest, 88 percent is public lands and 11.7 percent is owned by Native corporations. Instead, the Conservancy turned to community-based conservation—to determining the goals of the landowners and finding common ground for conservation. In 1995

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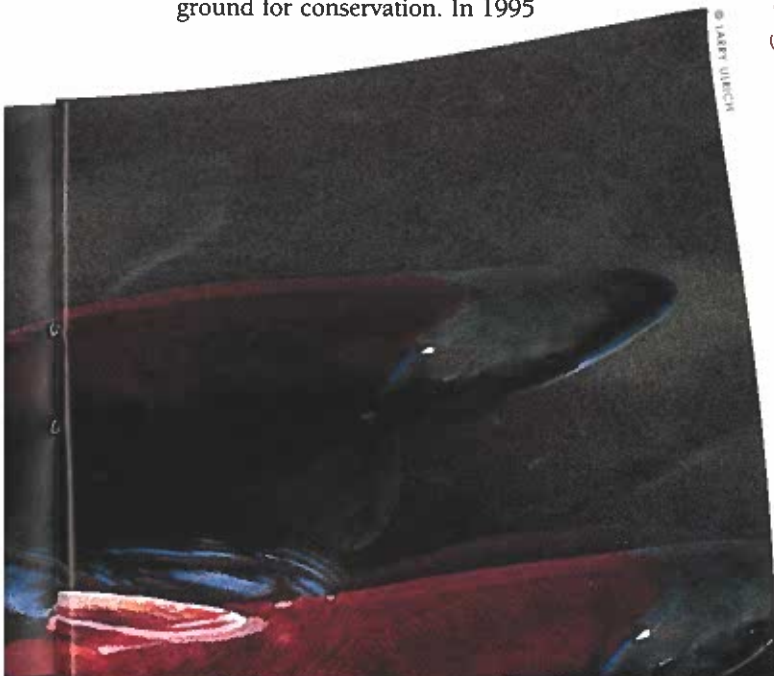
"Growth and development is happening so fast that it is overwhelming," says Peggy Mullen, who spearheaded a community forum to address the river's conservation needs.

the Conservancy established an office in Soldotna to assist watershed residents in conservation efforts.

Michelle Brown, programs manager for the Kenai River office, describes how she found things when she arrived. "I would tell people, 'We've got to keep the river healthy,' and they would say, 'Sure, of course,' not 'Why?'" she says with a laugh. Unlike a lot of Conservancy staff working in other communities, she didn't have to start by justifying why it's important to keep the watershed healthy. "What's made the project a success is people's love of the river."

For years, the only Kenai River issue that got much attention was salmon allocation—who got how many. "In the early 1990s," says Gary Liepitz, a biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, "it was like a cry-wolf situation. People really didn't believe there was anything to worry about."

The river supports a sportfishery that fetches \$40 million a year and accounts for nearly 13 percent of all sportfishing in Alaska. More than 400





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"Combat fishing" abounds along the banks of the Kenai, causing erosion that threatens juvenile salmon habitat.

guides work the river every summer, hired by scores of people who come not only because the fish are big and plentiful, but also because it is just a few hours' drive from Anchorage, Alaska's population and tourism center. A commercial fishery in Cook Inlet, whose average annual value is comparable to that of the river's sportfishery, also depends on Kenai salmon. Subsistence fishing, too, is important, especially for the small but cohesive tribe of Kenaitze Indians.

The Nature Conservancy recognizes salmon as key-stone species biologically, but the fish also play that role socially and economically. As go the fish, so go the communities. The Kenai presents an opportunity to save a salmon river before it's too late, but it sits on a fault line between the tamed rivers of the lower 48 and the wild rivers in much of Alaska: It could slide either way.

The region is growing rapidly. Visitation increased by

nearly 40 percent in the first five years of the 1990s.

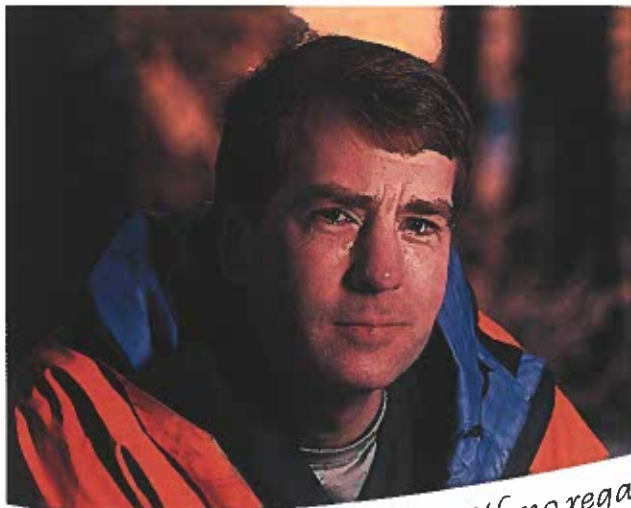
Development burgeoned more than 800 percent in 30 years. This not only creates riverbank and water pollution problems; it also encroaches on wildlife habitat, including a critical population of brown bears that, like all large Kenai land mammals, are geographically isolated from other Alaskan populations.

Brannon Ames felt the people explosion firsthand. "I was raised at the mouth of Beaver Creek," he says, "but I guess I always took the river for granted." Then, after being away from the river for some years, he and a friend who also grew up in Soldotna went fishing. "We were just dinkin' around," he recalls. "We were out of practice, our motor quit; I guess we were out of sync with the guides around us." Soon, a guide in another boat yelled out to them, "Why don't you get the — off my river! You

don't know what you're doing." Ames saw that the boat had Goose Bay, Oregon, written on the side. The guide didn't even live here. But between Ames and his friend, he says, "we had about 90 years here."

Such increasing use has larger effects. In 1994 biologist Gary Liepitz completed a comprehensive survey of the river, which found more than 12 miles of riverbank degraded by overuse. Anglers tromping up and down the banks on the upper river, and boat wakes, docks and jetties on the middle and lower river were causing erosion. Because salmon fry live within six feet of the riverbank, where the waters are shallow, slow and cooled by overhanging vegetation, this was bad news.

David Rhode lives across Kenai Lake from mountains named for his parents, Cecil and Helen Rhode. They homesteaded here in 1937, where Rhode still lives. There is a hot tub where his father's windmill once stood and a garden in the shape of a salmon, which he plants when the red salmon return. Now he's ensconced in land-use planning, trying to maintain the wilderness while accepting inevitable growth. "The focus has been on watershed issues," he says. "Keeping buffers, greenbelts, things we



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spilling out of an RV park. Their solution arrived when they found language in old borough regulations that prohibited commercial use of a riverbank that had been designated for preservation.

"It was on the books but had never been used," Ames says of the classification. The borough had used other land-use classifications. "Commercial, yes; heavy industry, yes; development, yes. But not preservation. Not until now." Led by the Ameses, the neighborhood persuaded the borough to designate the riverbank for preservation, halting potential degradation of salmon habitat.

"We're not just wearing away at the river," says Ames, his blue eyes flashing. "It's flat overused, no doubt, but what's worse is the exploitation with no regard for the effects. This was a wake-up call for me."

Says Michelle Brown, "When I got here four years ago, people were ready to figure out what to do." The Conservancy's community-based approach helped to bring together individuals who, like the streams and rivers that create the Kenai, could be a stronger force. Brown worked with existing organizations, including the Kenai River Center, which provides technical advice and issues permits, and the Kenai River Special Management Area Board, which provides input on river-related policies. She also helped to establish a Soldotna office for the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust to help landowners place

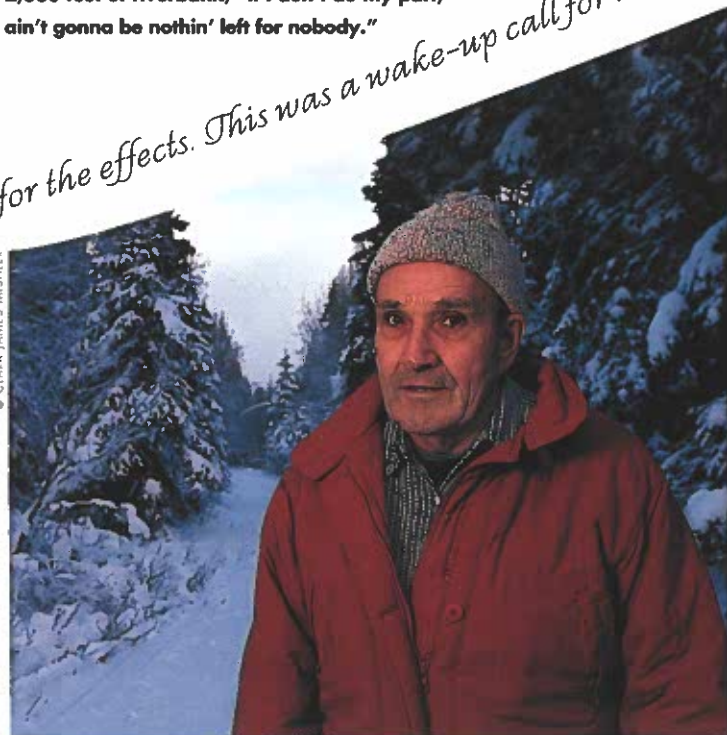
◀ Brannon Ames united with his neighbors to prevent a new RV park from potentially degrading the riverbank. Says Dale Bondurant, who with his brother is helping to restore 2,000 feet of riverbank, "If I don't do my part, ain't gonna be nothin' left for nobody."

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Brannon Ames and Ken Marlow also have been compelled into community action. In 1995, Ames, his wife, Judy, and their two young daughters bought a house with a view upriver of the glaciated mountains and the glacier-blue river meandering toward them. Right after they moved in, the four forested acres next to them were leveled for an RV park. With no zoning holding them back, the park's owners planned to use their sliver of riverfront to access a much larger stretch of undamaged riverfront on an adjacent 26 acres of borough land. The Ameses and their neighbors, including Ken and Judy Marlow, wanted to protect the borough-owned riverbank from fishers

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"People who were in the middle have been pushed into being more aware and taking action"

development restrictions in the form of conservation easements on their land.

Most of all, the Conservancy has helped citizens to speak for the river. In April 1996, the Conservancy sponsored a community forum, "Forces of a River," which brought together nearly 150 residents to talk about their visions for the watershed. Afterward, several people created the Kenai Watershed Forum as a citizen-based group that addresses the watershed's conservation needs.

"Growth and development are happening so fast that it's overwhelming," says Peggy Mullen, the forum's co-founder whose parents homesteaded near Soldotna Creek in 1948. "In Alaska the forces of a boom economy are arrayed against long-term human planning." The Kenai Peninsula, like much of Alaska, has seen its population—and concurrent development—flood and ebb with the boom economies of gold and oil. Such short-term residencies make long-term planning difficult. Now, says Mullen, "the Kenai Watershed Forum gives folks a place to be heard."

Mullen and nearly 50 other forum volunteers now monitor the water quality of Kenai River tributaries. Already it's paid off for the river. In Soldotna Creek, volunteers found abnormalities that could affect salmon spawning and growth. The findings were not surprising: Several years ago, the state Department of Transportation moved a salt pile used for icy winter roads to a bluff above the creek, and people had noticed that trees below it were dying. Armed with the new monitoring data, the forum and the city of Soldotna asked Alaska Governor Tony Knowles to have the salt pile moved. And it was.

Kenai Watershed Forum members prompted community action again over a state oil and gas lease sale. Under the original proposal, some tracts for sale were within only a quarter mile of the river mouth, and some included plans to drill horizontally into the river itself. Dan Chay, co-founder of the forum, drafted a letter to the governor and sent it to groups with interests in the river, many of which were at odds over other river issues. "Most groups didn't know about the leasing plans; they didn't work together," recalls Robert Ruffner, the forum's program coordinator. More than 20 groups signed the letter, which precipitated talks between community representatives and state agencies. In the end, some tracts were deleted from the sale. What's more, future sales also will have community input. "It was a success because we got people together for their shared interests," says Ruffner.

Such cooperative work can be a challenge, however. "Cooper Landing is a small and caring community," says David Rhode, "but nobody wants to be part of a group." Still, many agree that more people are speaking out, diluting the intimidating rhetoric of a few and revealing a more

balanced approach. Like those meltwater streams, the cumulative effects of individual actions gather strength.

Dale Bondurant, a retired machinist who speaks with equal fervor about the state of the planet and the state of his seven acres of riverfront land, demonstrates individual action. Two years ago, he and his brother Bob put in elevated metal-grating walkways along parts of his 2,000 feet of riverbank to protect vegetation while still allowing light through; they planted willow and ryegrass on the banks and more than 500 trees on the hillside—all to protect the riverbank. He also added a conservation easement to his deed through Kachemak Heritage Land Trust. "Alaska's been good to me; I want to give something back," he says. "Besides, if I don't do my part, ain't gonna be nothin' left for nobody."

Brannon Ames floats the river every year, "just to check on things." If he sees a violation, like a boat rocking the shore and eroding the bank, he makes sure it is stopped. Ken and Judy Marlow also patrol the river every spring. They clean up trash. They note changes—places with bank erosion, the effects of bank stabilization attempts. They read their river.

"Things are changing," says David Rhode. "The Nature Conservancy has been instrumental. They realize you have to work within communities and people have to want this stuff. That's where the hope is—public forums; somehow translating what citizens want to what government does." It's democracy in its purest form. "People who were in the middle have been pushed into being more aware and taking action," says Judy Ames. She stops and her voice softens. "But if you love the river, how can you turn your back?"

Just as the Kenai River is composed of all the streams and rivers feeding into it, so are the works of individuals and groups tributaries to a strong voice for the watershed. They are creating new ways to live with a river, ways that can be emulated elsewhere. Their voices flow from the same source as their tenacious independence: Once they've decided to love a place, it's for life. Says Bondurant, "When I die, I want 'em to roll me out in the river and let the fish eat me." ■

Anchorage-based MARYBETH HOLLEMAN has published articles and essays on the natural world—especially Alaska—in numerous anthologies, journals and magazines.

► **Communities along the Kenai River are coming together to help protect wildlife and ways of life.**

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