When I was very young my aunt Mimi lived with us and was like a second mom to our large family. When I was about 5 or 6, she up and moved to Alaska, where she built a cabin on a rural homestead. Every year she sent my sisters and I small ivory figurines, and ever other year she would come home for a visit. How we missed her but how she nurtured in us a desire to see and explore Alaska.

Our family grew up camping, fishing and hunting. We used to joke that we couldn’t afford any other kind of vacation because there were so many of us, be in reality my Dan felt uncomfortable in crowds and cities and chose to live in the country and vacation even further away. In a way, we grew up on public lands, putting up a big tent for the kids and a smaller one for my parents and running around like Huck Finn characters.

I was working for the rural electric cooperative in the rather small remote town of Winthrop, Washington when I heard of some job openings in Alaska. I applied for a few and was offered the position of assistant manager of the Tlingit Haida Regional Electric Authority in Juneau. I was hooked, although leaving all my family behind was hard, and I came up on a ferry in 1980. I quickly fell in love with the vastness of Alaska!

I later spent over 8 years in Kotzebue, Alaska, running a rural telephone cooperative. Living and playing in the Arctic was a special experience. I got to learn about a new culture, see the Brooks range, snowmachine, fly and boat throughout the western arctic, and have some of the most magical experiences of my life. Camping and hunting on public lands, I saw thousands of caribou migrating (and got to help Fish and Game collar them for studies), watched wolverine hunting, fished in the richly abundant Kobuk river, and hiked and traveled in places such as the Great Kobuk Sand dunes, the Kobuk Valley, the Noatak Valley and beyond.

I can’t imagine a life without our vast network of private lands. I tell my lower 48 friends that in the ‘states’ they have patches of wilderness in the overwhelming landscape of civilization, while in the Arctic we have dots of civilization in the midst of a huge wilderness. Living without accessible public lands means that only those with deep pockets can hunt, fish and recreate in the ‘wild’ (as is the case in most of Europe). I personally would loose my ‘soul’, my source of inspiration, of health, of dreams and my reason to pull through life’s hard times and get outside. Just getting up and slowly, carefully walking once again in our beautiful public lands is what brought me through rehab after a recent serious spinal surgery.

Kathy has told you of our learning about and joining the wonderful Great Old Broads for Wilderness. The underlying tenets of the Broads work is to keep wild lands wild and the Wilderness Act intact, to keep public lands in public hands, and to make public lands part of he solution to climate change. If we are to let go of the wildness of our public lands, we will loose the real treasure of the United States. Public land development means a shift in the habitat that many species of birds and mammals and fish rely on to live and thrive. Development or privatization of public lands means that parts of America are lost to most Americans, usually so that some large corporations, often foreign owned, can make millions. Working with the Broads has given focus for my passion and introduced me to a network of amazing women (and men) who believe that environmental preservation matters, and that fighting climate change means keeping our public lands wild and green.

My personal life is intricately tied to public land use. I live in a beautiful place with public lands on two sides of me. I spend almost every day hiking, skiing, snowshoeing or biking on public lands. I track wildlife, watch raptors, count songbirds, and hunt moose, caribou, sheep, goats and bears on public lands. Public lands provide the very large majority of the meat I eat, and all of the berries I love. I climb to mountaintops with my friend Kathy just to enjoy the route, to wonder at the variety of flowers, to look at the rocks, and to marvel at the views, the wildlife sightings and the skies we hike under. I take my grandchildren, and now my great grandchildren, hiking, climbing and swimming in the rivers. I used to work as a hunting guide, and made my living hunting mostly on public lands, often with my packer grandchildren at my side. Since they were small they learned to track wildlife, spot hunting birds and check all forms of scat for what was eaten; to study river ice formation, look at snow avalanche conditions, and to listen for the wild creatures around them. It was our classroom.

Our current administration has treated public lands as a cash cow, seeing in them only a source of fossil fuels or minerals to be extracted. It has ignored not only the animals that relied on the land, but the people who valued it, who lived on it, who were taught of it’s sacredness and it’s source of subsistence and cultural values. It is a very short sighted outlook that seeks just to reap benefits and line pockets, without consideration that once a natural landscape is desecrated it is destroyed forever. It has ignored the voices of the people for the benefits of the few. It agencies have held virtual meetings for remote villages with limited internet who were otherwise concerned with staying well in a global pandemic, and the agencies under this administration had no regard for the health, the basic needs or the technological limitations of the local populations. It has all but ignored the need for many of the landscapes for the future existence of many species of birds and wildlife. And it has denied the very existence of a climate emergency, which these actions are adding to.

Luckily a new administration is soon to be brought in. I ask President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris to honor the pledges they made throughout their campaign; to stop drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and indeed to stop all oil and gas drilling on public lands. I would ask them to urge the EPA to once again use its veto power to deny a clean water permit to the Pebble Mine. We need to investigate safe, clean and affordable renewable energy, and to invest in it’s production. We need to encourage investment in facilities to produce the wind and solar systems we need, and to invest in educating our current and future workforces in building, maintaining and developing these systems. I would also ask them to stand by their pledge to protect at least 30% or our lands by 2030 (30 X 30). Keeping wild lands wild is one of the key ways to help control the climate emergency. It also provides places for solace and renewal of the human spirit, places that aren’t littered with the detritus of fast food outlets and souvenir shops, much less the sights, sound and contamination of oil and gas drilling or mineral extraction. It is necessary to preserve the diverse species of wildlife that make these places home. And I would ask them to listen to and honor the indigenous peoples who have lived on these lands for generations. We can replace our dependence on fossil fuels with improved renewable energy sources, and we can learn to recycle/reutilize what we already have to lessen our need for more mineral extraction. We need to keep a reverence for wild lands and respect for undeveloped public lands uppermost in our value system.

Because Alaska’s economy is so dependent on oil and gas extraction, many Alaskans are afraid to fight against further resource development because they might alienate friends, family or neighbors who work on the slope or depend on the extractive industries for their livelihoods. I would urge them to take the long view; that ‘green energy’ development will mean a whole slew of new industrial, development, and maintenance jobs. I would also remind them that their temporary jobs come on the backs of the peoples who utilized those lands for centuries, and of the creatures who depend on the habitat for their very survival. Some of their jobs also threaten the livelihood of commercial fishermen, recreational guides, tourism businesses, and hunters. I know it is a hard fight to change our economy and our ways of life, and that self interest plays a part in most of our decision making, but we must do this for the future of our children, of our wildlife, and of our planet. In all honesty none of these arguments is going to gain ground when you are threatening the way of life of someone with a 6 figure salary in the oil fields. We need to invest first in new energy production, to offer the training needed for new jobs, and to show the children of the oil field workers what is possible for the future. Alaska survived the end of the gold boom, and we can survive this change too.