



# Circling the Sound

Bjørn Olson, Director<sup>1</sup>, Erin McKittrick, M.S., Director<sup>2</sup>, David Coil, PhD, Director<sup>3</sup>, Elizabeth Lester PhD<sup>4</sup>, Bretwood "Hig" Higman, PhD, Executive Director<sup>5</sup>  
contact@groundtruthtrekking.org

Last Modified: 31st May 2012

*This essay was written by **Bjorn Olson and Kim McNett** describing their circumnavigation of Prince William Sound in the summer of 2010*

## Background

In the summer of 2010, Kim and I attempted a circumnavigation of Prince William Sound in our handmade kayak. Familiar scenes of surfacing whales, calving tidewater glaciers, and winding watery mazes lay in wait. But in addition to our desire to witness this beauty, we sought insight into the ongoing transformations that distinguish the region. Through a collaboration with **Ground Truth Trekking**, we directed our vision to the rich past of human influence within this watery realm. From **native subsistence** to commercial **fisheries**, from the lingering tragedy of the **Exxon-Valdez spill** to the abundance of marine mammals, we seemed to find a story under every stone we overturned.

Upon our return in August, the national weather service reported that the summer of 2010 in South Central Alaska had been one of the coldest, gloomiest, and wettest on record. When people asked us how our trip went, the quick, single word answer was, "Wet". There were many days that it didn't rain and many that were partially clear, but of completely clear 24 hour periods we had exactly four. Through this soggy existence we witnessed an environment of great diversity and historical significance.

## Our Route

From scratch



*Early stage of development in our sea kayak.*

## Preparation

Throughout the previous winter and spring we built, from plans, our first stitch and glue tandem sea kayak. To transform a stack of 4x8 sheets of plywood into a sea-worthy craft was a fulfilling achievement. We often talked about the native boatbuilders of Alaska, wondering what it must have been like to build with driftwood and skin for material, using stone and bone tools, and to have anthropometric measurements and oral tradition as the only template for their kayaks and umiaks. Our process was much easier, with accurate plans and modern power tools, yet the preparation, vision and intention was part of an ageless art. We were creating an intimacy with our craft that we could never feel from a purchased boat.

On June 3rd, after months of anticipation, we were finally launching. The chaotic explosions of food and gear on our porch, living room, bedroom, kitchen, and car were finally consolidated and condensed into travel worthy packages. We were now free to live the simple existence of wilderness travel; the tides and weather would be our only clock.

## Launch

<http://www.groundtruthtrekking.org/Journeys/CirclingtheSound.html>

<sup>1</sup>Bjørn Olson, Director;

<sup>2</sup>Erin McKittrick, M.S., Director;

<sup>3</sup>David Coil, PhD, Director;

Creative Commons Attribution  
Non-Commercial



When we rounded the corner out of Passage Canal and beheld Prince William Sound we decided to practice an Eskimo roll. We had been doing various rescue practice techniques with the double and roll practice with a single, but this was the first time that we both Eskimo rolled in unison. No small feat, as both people have to respond at roughly the same time. We felt as prepared as anyone could expect to be.

On the morning of the second day we awoke to rain and a south-easterly gale. We wondered when summer was going to kick in. Retreat to the tent on day 2 is tough, but there was very little hope of progress in wind that strong. Over the next few days the wind died down but the rain was incessant. Every creek, rivulet, and stream was swollen. Even the forest floor duff was oozing like a sponge, overfilled and leaking on every side. The reality of a region imbued with numerous tidewater glaciers is that their formation is a result of copious amounts of precipitation. We knew that we needed to accept the rain and find the harmony of existing in a temperate rainforest.

When at last we received our first reprieve from the rain, we decorated a tree with our gear and used the faint rays and a hastily built fire to dry some of our damp clothing. After a few more hours of paddling we came into Kings Bay, posting a camp below Taylor Glacier, in a forest of trees that had been killed when the land sank and exposed their roots to sea water in the 1964 Good Friday earthquake. These forests are often called 'ghost forests' and have a horror movie charm about them. In exchange for the first night of no wind and rain we were treated to gnats by the tens of thousands.

### Changing Glaciers

The next morning we woke to clear skies and sun. A major objective of ours was to photo-document many of Prince William Sounds' glaciers, with the hope that our photos would be useful resources to those who wished to monitor the **drastic changes that many of the glaciers are experiencing**. With the exception of Meares Glacier, most tidewater and land-terminating glaciers in the sound are retreating... some at an alarming rate. Columbia Glacier, the largest in the sound, **is undergoing the greatest melting rate** with over 9 miles of ice breaking free in the last 30 years. These mighty formations, results of tens of thousands of years of snow accumulation, are serving as barometers for rapid accelerations in average global temperature. Columbia is predicted to retreat another 9 miles by 2020.

We hurriedly packed and paddled across the bay to do a hike up to Falling Glacier. After a short bushwhack and scramble we came to the top of a rocky knoll with views of the piedmont glacier spilling off the Sargent Icefield. Hoping to use this weather window to see Nelly Juan Glacier further out the bay we hurried back to the kayak and relaunched. The ideal evening with the glacier, however, was not to be. As we pulled on our paddles the weather slowly crept in around us and it became obvious that we would have no clear views that day. We camped on the old terminal moraine that evening and hoped for better luck in the morning. For the rest of our trip, we never saw another glacier under clear skies. In fact, the weather always seemed to get worse, and the temperature colder when we approached the ice monsters.

### Settled in

Over the weeks our routines became exacting and automatic. A non-hierarchical division of responsibility was silently sorted out and practiced efficiently. Together we would haul the boat

Trapped



Iceberg impoundment near Columbia Glacier

and gear up at the end of the day to well above high tide line, then bring it all down to reload in the morning. Our evening chores included finding a site to pitch the tent, setting it up, finding clean drinking water, gathering firewood, cooking meals, making hot drinks, and securing our food and gear. We naturally gravitated towards specific tasks and assumed responsibility of keeping track of certain items, regardless of whether or not they were personal. In this way, we kept our own mental inventories and everything was accounted for.

Logistical conversations centered around our changing environment. We usually found it easy to come to a consensus; with so many decisions to face every day, Kim and I formed an excellent partnership.

A day and a half after leaving Kings Bay, we came to Main and Falls Bay where a large portion of the western sound hatchery-released salmon fishing occurs. Like wild run salmon, hatchery reared salmon return to the exact site of their release after deep-sea maturation, even if a cascading waterfall thwarts all attempts to swim upstream. We took advantage of the easy picking with my 2 oz. treble hook and in a short time had a beautiful sockeye salmon. A couple from Anchorage motored in as we were leaving. As we passed by they offered us a dozen spot shrimp they had caught in a pot earlier that day. We thanked them and went to the beach to make our feast which also included a Bud Lite that Kim had found in the strand line earlier. We both agree that this was, and probably always will be, the best tasting Bud Lite of our lives. The taste of fresh red salmon, though, is a gift to be enjoyed by all, even the most refined palate.

Lean



Over



Roll



Keep going



Our route, and some points of interest along the way. Click on icons for more.

The next morning at 8am sharp, the fleet of gill and set netters jumped to life. Every boat was working fast to put their nets out in an attempt to harvest the salmon. Talking to a few fishermen later in the day, the general consensus was that the season had already peaked. No one was complaining, but the previous weeks had been better. It was apparent that, in addition to monetary benefits, a healthy run supports a lifestyle and identity of a culture. We worked our way through the boats, nets, and tenders, occasionally accepting the gift of a fresh salmon, and continued south through Dangerous Passage and into the mouth of Icy Bay.

### Narrow escape

Brash ice swirled around us as we sat expectantly, watching the massive face of the Chenega Glacier. Every so often, another calving event would occur, pouring more ice into the bay. After an hour or so of watching one of nature's greatest shows we were cold and needed to paddle. Kim was worse off, as she had forgotten to unpack her pogies in the morning before we launched. They were in the front hatch of the boat and un-retrievable from the cockpit. We pulled into a beach, still within view of the glacier, with a sea-stack island bisecting the approach. I mentioned to Kim that we needed to do this fast because if a large calving event occurred, it could send a wave crashing onto this beach. I stayed in my cockpit and waited for Kim to find her pogies.

Minutes passed, I grew more anxious as she still had not found the objects of her desire. Besides looking behind me every few seconds, I tried to calm myself by looking at the map on the deck. Then, without any sound, all of the water under the kayak was gone. We had heard no stirring from the glacier, yet here was proof that it had calved, displaced water, and sent out a large wave. Because of the small island in front of the beach, the wave was not coming at us in the usual fashion; instead it was traveling across the beach at right angles. When I looked up to my left, I saw a head high wave racing toward me, our kayak, and the pile of unpacked gear. "Pull us up!" I yelled to Kim as I jumped out of the kayak in time to grab the cockpit and brace my feet into the sand as the first wave crashed into my back and hit the boat sideways. Kim held the bow in a death grip and we were able to save the kayak. The next few seconds were a blur of adrenaline soaked actions. We pulled the loaded kayak, now full of water, out of reach of the waves and threw all the loose gear up before the next wave had crested. After a quick inventory, we found we had lost nothing. We quickly pumped out the water, repacked, turned the boat around and watched for an opportunity to launch.

Well after the waves had subsided, the back and forth current continued to slosh at right angles to the beach. When we finally pushed off, it was like launching into a river. We were swept down-beach at speed and before we were clear we collided with a rock that lay hidden under the silty surface. We winced at the sound of buckling fiberglass. A few paddle strokes brought us to safe and deep water. We let out a sigh of relief and chided ourselves for letting such an obviously foreseeable event happen. Our lives depended on our boat and gear and in such a remote area, hope for assistance is case of emergency was foolish. We renewed our pledge to common sense and safety.

Our scare with the wave was an eerie foreshadow to our visit of Chenega village. In 1964 the village had been hit with a tsunami following the 9.2 magnitude earthquake. The wave killed a third of the 68 residents. For years, the village was abandoned and it wasn't until the 1980's that survivors decided to rebuild. They chose, however, a new location, in Sawmill Bay on Evans Island. Our stay in Chenega was brief, but a community leader opened the museum for us and told us of some of the hardships that their village faces. She explained that an entire generation is missing. It is this generation that would now be the elders and they felt the loss of their wisdom more than 45 years later.

### Oil and metal

On the day of the 25th anniversary of the quake, another tragedy struck Chenga. In the opposite corner of the Sound the **Exxon-Valdez tanker ran aground**, spilling the contents of its hold. At least 11 million gallons of crude oil was released into the currents of the sound and greater Gulf of Alaska. Chenega, a community extremely dependent on **subsistence** from the sea, was caught directly in the path of

Gill Netter



*A Gill Netter in Falls Bay laying out the net.*

Kayaking through ice and fog.



the flow. The immediate effects were devastating to the communities' availability to wild harvest foods. Now, 21 years later, the **undegraded oil that lies below the surface** is slowly releasing toxins into the food web and delaying recovery for many species. Studies on salmon and **herring** have shown that degraded oil in the parts per billion causes malformation, genetic damage, mortality, and decreased size and embryonic development. As we paddled through this recovering habitat the **Deepwater Horizon oil well** in the Gulf of Mexico was continuing to gush 62,000 barrels (over 2.5 million gallons) of crude oil every day as it had for months, beginning when our boat was still a stack of plywood. We lamented the future of this distant water body, as here was evidence that wounds caused by similar negligence have yet to heal, decades later.

Directly across the channel from Chenega lies the abandoned **Beatson-Bonanza copper mine** that was in operation from 1904 to 1930.

Beatson Mine



Mine debris at Beatson Mine

We decided to camp at the site and spend the afternoon exploring the wreckage. After the Kennicott Copper Cooperation extracted over 182 million pounds of copper from the site, they left, leaving a scar on the mountain, a pile of useless buildings and machinery, and elevated levels of zinc, copper, lead, **and acid** to leach into the marine environment. This site is a reminder to be motivated stewards in the future with regard to the **perpetuity of mine wastes**.

## Outer Sound

A new ambience marked the remote straights of the outer sound. We were getting accustomed to our gear and life on the water. Our strength was increasing and we felt prepared to brave the first open water crossings.

Remembering our pact of caution, we patiently waited out an evening of borderline conditions for an early start on our crossing to Montague. The trend we'd seen was that wind speed progressively increases throughout the day. The gusts built and died, rainclouds swirled overhead, and our view of the distant peaks bumped and jostled as our boat slowly became detached from the security of the shore.

Once on Montague Island, we found ourselves floating through a prime example of a marine food web. The sea was calm and clear as we peered through the rich waters of the estuary at the undulating fronds of a kelp forest, habitat to countless invertebrates. Though there were no humans in sight, we were far from alone. Dozens of black otter eyes scrutinized our every move as they rafted together. If we were too quick, or if we drifted too close, they would take the nape of their young in jaw and slip into the darkness of the water column. On shore a colony of seals, formally at rest, descended in unison. A different creature than the otters, they would circle our boat, releasing curtains of bubbles which came crackling to the surface. Then we heard the unmistakable sound of a blowhole. Two humpback whales, feeding just offshore, broke the surface with their terrific mass and submerged again, leaving only ripples and an incredible sense of awe. We noticed a school of forage fish snatching at pink krill directly under our hull, and found it almost unbelievable that those tiny krill can support the metabolic demands of a humpback whale. Indeed, Prince William Sound boasts profuse marine life and it is scenes like this one which make evident the interconnectedness of life in the sea.

Gulls outside of the Cordova boat harbor.



Many links are needed to keep the chain intact, yet crucial links are currently being weakened by the slow, long-term effects of a changing atmosphere. The worlds oceans are **acidifying at an alarming rate**, and some planktonic species are already showing negative effects. Ocean acidification occurs at greater rates in colder waters; the same cold waters that support the nutrient rich food sources that many species deem worthy of thousand-mile-long migrations to access. Thus, critical habitats that appear pristine are being tainted by the accumulation of many people's actions across great distances and over long periods of time.

If there was a low period in our trip, it was on eastern Montague. The weather had been foul, rain torrential, no visibility and strong winds. We knew that soon we would have to face our longest crossing of nine miles to reach Hinchbrook Island. We desired a clear opportunity, yet every time we checked the weather on the handheld VHF, the outlook sounded bleak. In the back of Rocky Bay our map showed a Forest Service cabin. A cabin would be just the thing to lighten our water-logged moods. We searched every possible bight, all

in vain. Instead of a shelter, we saw a large brown bear, of which Montague is famous for, walking the shore line. Its presence further eroded our spirits. We decided to camp on the end of an inhospitably rocky peninsula that we figured would not be a usual thoroughfare for the bears.

In the afternoon of the following day the winds calmed some and we decided to have a look at our crossing. Neither of us felt sure, but it was worth taking a look. Hinchbrook was only slightly visible through the fog, but the forecast had stopped calling for the 25 mph winds and the thought of going back to camp in the rain with the bears spurred us on. About 2/3rds of the way across the wind died, Hinchbrook came into view and we knew that we were succeeding. The feeling of relief was profound.

## Tatilik

A week later we pulled into the village of Tatilik. We had resupplied in Cordova days before but had neglected to fill our spare fuel bottle. Fuel for our stove was a luxury that we could live without, but in this instance it was an excuse to meet people. "Do you have any gas?" I asked the first people we saw, who were tying their pleasure boat up at the makeshift dock. The couple, it turned out, was the chief of the village and his wife, just back from a day of fishing. Not only did they oblige us with fuel, they offered us a beautiful yellow-eye rockfish, a bag

of fruit and half a dozen chocolate bars. Kim and I had been trying to decide on a name for our kayak for weeks and had been wondering what the Alutiq word for loon was. We asked the chief if he knew. He did not, but told us that if we came back the next day he would find the name for us.

True to his word, Chief David Totemof had found an Alutiq animal book that listed the loon. Its name is Tuullek and with his blessing we bestowed it unto our kayak. David and Lisa invited us into their home and treated us to a tour that would make a Smithsonian historian salivate. Located on a site that had been inhabited by David's family for generations, he told us stories about his ancestors and showed us his grandfathers authentic qayaq paddles that he had found hidden in the rafters while he was reconstructing their home. It was an honor for us to be so graciously received by this venerable couple, and this chance meeting bolstered our vigor as we crossed into the northern fjords, and the last leg of our journey.

While crossing Valdez arm latter that evening, a double hull oil tanker, full of north slope crude oil, passed in front of us on it's way out of the sound. This major shipping lane skirts the iceberg impoundment of Columbia Glacier, a dangerous zone of ebbing and flowing ice chunks. The rig was escorted past Bligh Reef by two tugs, complete with oil spill response training, boom, and the ability to tow the tanker in case it were to founder. We wondered to each other why it often takes a catastrophe to implement obvious safeguards.

### Homeward reflections

While Prince William Sound supports an incredible amount of geographic diversity and marine life, we have read accounts that suggest that it has been highly compromised over the last two centuries. We realize that recent generations have witnessed subsequent declines in available resources, and that our interpretation is limited to that which we have seen in our time. Through the asking of questions and the gain of first hand experiences, we are learning to look beyond our life spans. By confronting mistakes of former practices, we can choose pathways that are conducive to a healthy future.

At the approach of our last big crossing of Port Wells, the familiar sinking feeling in our guts returned. We could not see the far shore due to the low clouds, and the winds were coming in gusts. After marking our destination coordinates into our GPS we took a deep breath and left the safety of shore. About half way across shafts of sun beamed down on our destination, filling us with awe and a deep appreciation for the beauty of our surroundings. We could see Decision Point, where over a month before we had performed our first Eskimo roll, and thought of all that had transpired since that time. The wind continued to build and was blowing directly into us, forcing us into a low, defensive crawl. We had come over 500 miles to see this mission through and we felt accepting of this last challenge.

Date Created: 4th January 2011

Dinner



*Yellow Eye rockfish; gift from the chief of Tatitlik Village*