

To Touch and be Touched by the Wild

I am Alaskan. The rain comfortably chills my soul, reminding me of playing fairies and mushroom hunting in dense, mossy forests. Despite spending most of my years in the lower 48, when I returned to 'the last frontier' for a marine debris cleanup along the Katmai Coastline, the land and seascape awakened a core sense of my identity. After 15 hours of travel from Oregon to Kodiak Island, I was ready to board an 80-foot steel ship named Island C with 13 other advocates and scientists from North America. I embraced the nostalgic smell of fish guts on the dock and the sight of weathered fishing vessels branded with the names of fisherpersons' mothers or lovers. As we pulled out of the harbor and commenced our journey through the Kodiak Archipelago and across the Shelikof Strait, I appreciated the disconnect from social media. It allowed me to be present, have deeper relationships with the crew, and be fully immersed in the learning and adventure of the experience.

Wildlife escorted our journey: Fin Whales breached the glassy blue water, Sea Otters tangled themselves playfully in bull kelp, and Puffins swarmed cliff sides. Although Katmai seduces an explorer's eye with its beauty, the beaches are deposits of islands of plastic that move in the Subpolar Gyre. With our work ahead each morning, the alluring smell of coffee wafted through our thin cabin door and roused us into our hip waders and rain jackets at 6 am. The small Zodiak introduced us to different pebble-covered beaches daily, where we spent hours satisfyingly removing garbage from an otherwise pristine scene. The sun guided Island C late into the June night, which made for long productive days. Notable findings captured everyone's attention: an 80-foot rope holding a hillside of tall grass together, the vertebrae of a Sea Lion, an intact kayak, a flyswatter, and 25 square feet of plastic webbing embedded within a rocky beach. Every day finds such as buoys and fishing nets accounted for most of the weight in our 'super sacks.' By the seventh day the entire hull of Island C was filled with garbage.

I stood at Island C's bow feeling the chill of a northeastern wind blowing in from the Pacific Ocean. The large boats' steel curves pushed onwards toward our final anchor destination and the rocking eased intrusive anxiety about returning home to family and the business of life. The rocking feeling is something I return to in times of stress, focusing on the crest of a wave that rises from the trough.

Our final day of trash pick-up was cut short. As we slowly combed over rugged terrain, our first Halo Bay Grizzly Bear appeared from the ominous woods that swept down to the rocky crest of the beach. We had seen other Grizzlies, but none compared to the notorious, enormous beast that moved down the coast toward us. Our group collectively dashed atop a large boulder clapping our hands and yelling. The collective uproar sent the 700-pound creature backtracking into the dense green bush. Still, the threat of it revisiting motivated us to abandon the beach. This lesson of being uncomfortable in another animal's environment humbled all of us, and reminded me of the space humans must show towards the animals who have inhabited the lands long before our time.

A floatplane met Island C in Halo Bay early the following day. After hugging my new found boat family goodbye I retraced our seven day journey from the sky as we crossed south over the Shelikof Strait and small islands we had cleared of trash. The humm of the small plane's engine and memories of morning yoga in hip high rubber waiters, a zodiak ride surrounded by a pod of dancing porpoises, and dipping into the chilling clear waters of a hidden cove on a beautiful 60 degree day flooded my mind. This reflection period deepened my appreciation and awareness of the impact this expedition had on my life. My interest in environmentalism has transcended into a passion as I participate in educational and actionary experiences that deepen my relationship with the world around me and I know my future is filled with more inspiring work.