

PWS 2006 Cleanup

The 2006 Prince William Sound beach cleanup had four distinct phases. This season, Gulf of Alaska Keeper, with the strong financial support of MCAF and several corporate and private donors, conducted two aerial marine debris beach surveys on the Montague Island outer Gulf coast in April and May. Over two weekends in late April and early May, 12 volunteers in three vessels surveyed the eastern side of the Knight Island archipelago. On May 14-15, nearly 100 volunteers including boat crews in 12 motor vessels and 15 kayaks collected marine debris on Knight Island beaches from the southern side of the mouth of the Bay of Isles all the way to the northern tip of Eleanor Island. Most of the debris collected during the volunteer effort was left in the field for subsequent retrieval by a contract crew. After the volunteer cleanup, GoAK organized and conducted a debris survey along the western side of PWS from Lighthouse Point to Granite Bay.

The Montague debris survey was designed to ascertain whether a debris cleanup on the outer Gulf coast is feasible. There is a staggering amount of debris on Montague's outer beaches. There are magnitudes more debris than on the dirtiest Knight Island beaches. GoAK believes it can be removed, but recognize that we must refine our cleanup techniques before we make the attempt. Accordingly, in 2007, we plan to clean a small area of outer coast that has similar levels of debris concentration to that found on Montague beaches. However, we need to clean an area that is accessible by boat, which is logistically an easier task than what will be faced on Montague. We have tentatively identified that area to be Gore Point off the southeast Kenai Peninsula.

The information gained from the marine debris surveys along Knight Island was very useful for planning and directing the subsequent volunteer effort. Also, during the surveys, marine debris monitoring plots were established in Snug Harbor, the Bay of Isles, in Mega Byte, on Eleanor Island and in Shelter Bay on Evans Island. During a subsequent survey along the western side of PWS, monitoring plots were established on Applegate Island and Perry Island. All debris was removed from these plots. Each spring the plots will be revisited and any accumulated debris will be removed and quantified.

The western PWS survey found a coastline that was relatively clean, probably due to a combination of currents, location and the fact that the area has a large commercial set net fishery. Set netters habitually remove floating debris along the beaches to keep their nets from fouling. Consequently, the areas with active set net sites were very clean, at least on the beach. Unfortunately, we did discover numerous illicit dumpsites of old nets, lines and other commercial fishing gear. Next summer, GoAK expects to work with the commercial fishing community to remove the abandoned gear.

Altogether, GoAK surveyed over 300 miles of coastline with the help of five volunteer vessels and 18 volunteers.

On May 14 and 15, the volunteer cleanup collected debris from the south side of the Bay of Isles to the north end of Eleanor Island. The volunteers collected nearly 600 bags of garbage and nearly an equivalent amount of larger debris such as nets, lines and large plastic containers. Approximately 150 bags were hauled back that the same weekend and deposited in Whittier dumpsters. The remaining debris was cached above the high-tide line for later retrieval by a contractor. The goal for the 2006 volunteer cleanup was to clean approximately 15 miles of coast from the northeast tip of Knight Island through the Bay of Isles. We nearly doubled that goal by cleaning to the northern tip of Eleanor Island. With excellent weather and a motivated workforce, the volunteer effort was a resounding success.

Volunteer cleanups can be very cost effective. However, they are very time consuming to organize and manage. GoAK expended hundreds of volunteer hours in planning and coordinating the volunteer cleanup effort, so the volunteer effort does have a real cost. And, while we appreciate the effort and enthusiasm of volunteer cleaners, it is clear that the volunteer cleaners do not do as thorough a job removing debris from beaches and adjacent uplands as the subsequent contract crew did. But, because of the public exposure and goodwill the volunteer effort creates, GoAK will continue the program.

After the volunteer cleanup effort, GoAK hired a contract crew to remove the debris collected by the volunteers and to continue the cleanup down the east side of Knight Island. MCAF generously extended the contract cleanup funding twice, which allowed the cleanup crew to continue cleaning the entire Knight Island archipelago coastline. Four crewmen in two vessels cleaned over 350 miles of shoreline in 41 days. They removed 1962 bags of garbage, filling 41 dumpsters, from Knight Island beaches. That filled 17 boatloads with plastic debris. That is in addition to the 150 bags hauled back during the volunteer weekend that filled 5 Whittier dumpsters. So the total debris removed from the Knight Island region in 2006 was 2112 bags and other assorted debris that filled 46 Whittier dumpsters. While total weight is difficult to estimate, we believe it was in the 35-ton range. Nearly all the removed debris is plastic and a large portion, at least 50%, is of foreign or offshore origin.

All the good fishing floats, buoys, and boat fenders recovered were dumped into totes in Whittier and given away free to the public.