

Journal of Community Service Experiences

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This last summer, I participated in a US Forest Service's, Chugach Children's Forest 2012 Youth Expedition. This grant-based program was run through the Alaska Geographic Organization. I was one of two students from Girdwood K--8 School nominated to have the opportunity to apply to this adventuresome summer leadership program. My 8th Grade Language Arts, Science and Social Studies teachers nominated me because of my high academic standing (awarded Girdwood Student of the Year 2012) and interest in science and the out--of--doors. I felt very lucky to be accepted into this program because many students, most of whom were older than myself, were nominated from all over Alaska to participate in this program. I was one of eight high school students in the June Habitat Restoration Expedition in Prince William Sound.

We met as a group for the first time in May at the Alaska Geographic Anchorage Office. Ann Mayo---Kiely (the Program Director and grant writer) and Betsy Oliver (our chaperone) went over our ten---day itinerary, maps of where we could be doing habitat restoration with US Forest Service personnel, and the equipment essentials to pack for sea---kayaking and camping.

Day 1 of our real adventure, however, began on June 9. We met again at the Anchorage Alaska Geographic Office to do an equipment check, pack our gear into dry bags, practice setting up and taking down our two---man tents, and plan our meals. We also discussed each of our hopes and expectations for this unique out---door experience and did several team building exercises. We then went shopping with our food preparation team to buy the food we would need to cook our assigned daily meals. Afterwards, we went to Alaska Pacific University pool to practice emergency cold---water sea kayaking procedures. I was surprised to learn how few people in our group had ever paddled a kayak before. I was glad that I had grown up learning to paddle a kayak at our family's lake cabin.

Our group of eight high school students and two chaperones spent our first night at the Chugach School District Anchorage House. It was to be the last night we would sleep in a bed, take a shower, have running water, use a flushing toilet or have access to any type of electronic device.



Day 2, undaunted by the rain, we left around 6:00 am the next day and drove to Whittier. There we loaded our kayaks and gear onto a landing craft and went to our first campsite across from Surprise Glacier in Harriman Fjord. There we set up camp, hauled fresh water, and hung our

food in a cache safe from bears. Later, we had the first of our nightly meetings to reflect on all that had happened and discuss plans for the next day. We all went to bed exhausted. It was a long day.

Day 3, began with breakfast at first light. We had a busy morning packing our sack lunches in our dry bags and kayaking to our first meeting with US Forest Service personnel. I was in the “banana boat” (yellow, three---man kayak). There were also two one---man kayaks and three two---man sea kayaks in our eleven---person group. We had quite an adventure maneuvering through glacier ice with many inexperienced kayakers. The rangers gave us a talk about identifying local fungus. Then we were sent out to find varieties of different species found throughout the area.

Day 4, we kayaked for seven hours, to and from, Black Sand Beach where we helped US Forest Service personnel search for the infamous invasive species *Taraxacum officinale* (aka “Dandelion”). Removal of invasive species when they are first detected in a sensitive habitat like Prince William Sound is critical to stopping their spread. There was more snow on the ground than usual, so we were only able to locate two plants for irradiation at this site. This was still significant, however, because dandelion spread quickly into fragile ecosystems and compete with native plant species.



On our long paddle to and from Black Sand Beach, we learned how to paddle as a group in a “sunflower formation.” This allowed us to hear each other over the thundering glaciers and keep all group members in sight.



Day 5---6, were travel days. We moved our camp over twenty miles to the head of College Fjord. We continued our search for invasive species and had a gruesome discovery: a dead seal, various animal bones and over fifty bird carcasses strewn everywhere on a remote beach. It was a mystery as to how they died.

Day 7---8, we helped the USFS personnel with Coghill Trail restoration. This was my favorite part because I felt like we accomplished the most there. Using limb cutters, we trimmed back brush away from the trail. To prevent injury from slipping on the wet boardwalk, we also stapled a fish net covering over the boards. As we worked we could hear the distinctive sound of silver salmon rolling in the bay. A passing commercial fishing boat took pity on us and gave us a silver salmon for our dinner. It was delicious and the only fresh food we had on the entire trip.



Day 9, was our final day on the water. After another early breakfast, we packed up our camp and boarded a landing craft bound for Whittier. The van took us back to the Anchorage House. It was a shock to return to civilization and the many luxuries it offered, like hot showers. As we sorted our gear and wrote thank you letters to the donors who made this trip possible, we realized just how close we all had become in such a short time.

All too soon we shared our final meal together and then our parents came to pick us up. Thanks to Facebook, however, I have been able to keep in touch with many of the friends I made on this unforgettable journey and reminisce on how the experience affected each of us. I look forward to getting together again at our planned September REI evening talk and slide show. The ability to share this unique experience with others helps me appreciate all that I was able to learn and do through this opportunity.