Jeff Mow

Peter Armato

(Left) Sea kayakers in Pedersen Lake with seals in the background on an iceberg.

Photograph by Caroline Jezierski

Ocean Park Stewardship in the Alaska Region

By Jeff Mow and Peter Armato

Since the dawn of time mankind has been fearful and respectful of, and at the same time drawn to, coasts and oceans. These human traits led early explorers out to sea where they mapped ocean boundaries, discovered islands and continental land masses, established trade routes, constructed larger more seaworthy vessels, and refined navigation methods. Throughout this early period of exploration, vast coastal and ocean resources were discovered and exploited. The wealth of resources and perceived enormity of the earth and its oceans led early explorers to believe that coastal and ocean resources were inexhaustible.

Now however, we are armed with the knowledge that our resources are finite and that a delicate balance exists between nature and human activities. There are signs that our oceans are undergoing dramatic change as a result of warming temperatures, the melting of the cryosphere, and ocean acidification. For the first time in a million years, the Arctic Ocean may be ice free during the summer months (http://atoc.colorado.edu/~dcn/reprints/Overpeck_etal_EOS2005.pdf); this could occur as soon as 2030 (National Snow and Ice Data Center). As such, we stand poised to enter a new and challenging era of coastal and ocean exploration, discovery, and stewardship.

In 2006 the National Park Service launched the Ocean Park Stewardship Action Plan, a strategy aimed at reconnecting with and rediscovering our coastal and ocean resources. Our goals include: 1) establishing a seamless network of ocean parks, sanctuaries, refuges and reserves; 2) to discover, map, and protect ocean parks; 3) to engage visitors in ocean park stewardship; and 4) to increase NPS technical capacity for ocean exploration and stewardship.

The Alaska Region of the NPS has significant coastal and ocean management responsibilities. We manage approximately 35% of the total land mass, 54% of the marine shoreline and 40% of marine waters held in trust by the National Park Service. As such, accomplishing the goals of the action plan will be a significant undertaking but not insurmountable. Over the next several years, as part of the National Park Service Centennial, the Pacific West and Alaska Regions will give shape to the Pacific Ocean Parks Strategy, which will guide us as we begin our voyage of coastal and ocean re-discovery throughout the Pacific Basin.

The articles that follow not only describe the studies that are monitoring some of the significant changes taking place around us, but also describe some of the new discoveries that are being made in our coastal and ocean park areas.