

Story last updated at 3:47 PM on Thursday, September 9, 2004

CoastWalk celebrates 20 years of walking the beaches

BY Michael Armstrong
Staff Writer

Since its start in 1984, volunteers with the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies Kachemak Bay CoastWalk have put in a lot of footsteps on the 230 miles of coastline from Anchor Point to Point Bede < and a lot of hours: 4,384 hours, to be exact. They've documented wildlife, birds, shoreline changes, intertidal life and human use < and abuse.

Along the way the volunteers also have picked up 490 bags and 3,165 pounds of garbage, not counting the junk cars, wrecked airplanes and heavy junk hauled out in the early years. They've also counted every bit of garbage, sorting it out by type and entering the information in the International Coastal Cleanup inventory of shoreline debris sponsored by the Ocean Conservancy.

This year, CoastWalk volunteers will pound the sand again, signing up for any of 32 units all the way past Nanwalek and gathering information and more trash. CoastWalk starts tonight at 7:30 p.m. with a dessert potluck at the Center for Alaskan Coastal

Studies off Lake Street. Volunteers can sign up for a unit, pick up their CoastWalk information packets and listen to Susan Saupe, science coordinator for Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, discuss its new ShoreZone mapping program (see story, page 17A).

The center also is publishing a 20-year retrospective of CoastWalk, said Beth Trowbridge, this year's CoastWalk coordinator.

"It's been a tremendous community effort all these years," said center Director Marilyn Sigman. "Some fundamental positive shifts have occurred in how people who live here view their beaches and how they should be used and stewarded. The people who walk the same stretch of beach year after year have observed that and have been a force in that change."

The first CoastWalk was held in April 1984, with a few units monitored, Trowbridge said. In April 1987, Kachemak Bay was marked out into 32 zones, with some of those zones continuously monitored. Since 2001 all zones have been covered, Trowbridge said.

One thing CoastWalk hopes to accomplish is provide more accurate information on trends like accumulations of driftwood in storm berms. The city of Homer's Beach Policy encourages beach users to not collect driftwood from berms and leave it there. Is that policy working? Some anecdotes suggest the berms are building back up.

"That's something we're trying to accomplish through CoastWalk," Trowbridge said. "There is a lot of anecdotal, or qualitative data. What would be more beneficial is quantitative data."

CIRCAC's ShoreZone mapping program provides a large-scale overview of major ecological and geological zones, such as eelgrass beds or rocky beaches. Instead of observing the coastline from a helicopter flying along at 300 feet and 60 knots while a camera operator makes a videotape, CoastWalk volunteers can supplement that information by walking the coast on the ground. They also can verify observations like mussel beds.

"We're at the infancy stage of trying to coordinate these two projects, trying to get more data useful to policy makers, scientists, citizens and homeowners," Trowbridge said.

While trash isn't the only focus of CoastWalk, the kind of debris deposited on the beaches can tell a lot about changes in human use of the bay. While the data isn't consistent between the first 17 years and the last two years, comparing trash collected from 1984 to 2001 and trash from 2002 to 2003 can show some general trends, Trowbridge said.

Take fast-food containers. From 1984 to 2001, four items were collected compared to 581 items for 2002 to 2003. Plastic bottles have increased five-fold, from 108 in 1984 to 2001 to 523 in 2002 to 2003.

"It just seems like that kind of stuff has really increased on the beaches," Trowbridge said.

Another increase in trash collected has been construction material, such as lumber scraps, pipe and plastic. From 2002 to 2003, 335 such items were collected compared to 41 from 1984 to 2001. Smoking materials < including cigarette lighters < have also increased, from four in 1984 to 2001 to 128 filters and cigar tips and 29 lighters for 2002 to 2003.

For commercial fishing debris, from 1984 to 2001, 73 items were found, compared to 99 for 2002 to 2003. Fishing nets dropped, though, from 40 in 1984 to 2001 to 21 in 2002 to 2003. Rope < fishing related or not < went up, though, from 72 pieces in 1984 to 2001 to 177 in 2002 to 2003.

The top 10 items from 1984 to 2001 were beverage cans, plastic bottles, car parts, buoys, rope, glass bottles, construction materials, fish nets and tied for 10th place, caps and lids and bags and wrappers. From 2002 to 2003, the top 10 items were cans, food containers, plastic bottles, construction materials, caps and lids, glass bottles, bags and wrappers, rope, cups/plates and forks, cigarette filters and clothing.

Trowbridge said the change in top 10 items shows a shift from commercial fishing use in the bay to individual recreational use.

CoastWalk continues through Sept. 26. CoastWalk also is going on in conjunction with activities and events sponsored by the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve, the Alaska Islands and Ocean Visitor Center, the

Pratt Museum and the Kachemak Bay Campus, Kenai Peninsula College. See the calendar on page 17A for a list of Coastweeks' events, all on the focus of plankton.

For more information, call the center at 235-6667. For information on the International Coastal Cleanup, visit www.oceanconservancy.org.

Michael Armstrong can be reached at michael.armstrong@homernews.com.