

On the back of the Kenai Peninsula there is a large cliff-lined hook of land sticking out into the Gulf of Alaska. On the eastern side twisted and tilting trees, bare on their ocean facing sides, serve as a testament to the frequent storms and strong winds that have helped shape this coast. Between steep slopes hundreds of feet high, there is a narrow strip of low lying land with beaches on either side sandwiched by cliffs. From these beaches mountain goats can be seen carefully moving on the mountain sides, off shore humpback whales spout and dive, and there are fish to be caught, but these are not what we are here looking for. This piece of land is Gore Point. It is what is known as a catcher beach, and we are here to collect and count what it has caught, marine debris. The Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies (CACs) joined up again with Gulf of Alaska Keeper (GoAK) and their crew to clean and monitor the beaches of Gore Point. Getting to Gore Point is only by boat, or float plane, so on July 12th, after a two day delay caused by strong winds, four CACS volunteers, including teachers and high schoolers from Homer, and I boarded a DeHavilland Otter and took off to meet the GOAK crew aboard their boat the C-KEPR.

After a short trip from the drop off point to the protected west side of Gore Point we took inflatables to the beach, crossed the narrow piece of low land and started working to gather debris. This east beach on Gore Point acts like the pocket of a baseball glove gathering anything in the water as the current pushes past the hook. Gore Point does not discriminate and gathers both manmade and natural items out of the waves that push up on shore. Before we can get to the beach we must cross an obstacle built by all of these natural items, a log jam. Eight feet high in some places and 50 feet across, this barrier of logs serves as a slick and complex border between the forest and the beach. It also serves as a strainer where much of the debris we find during our three days at Gore Point is held.

We pluck out a few large, brightly colored pieces of debris and set them as markers to divide the half mile beach into seven manageable zones. After this we start the task that will dominate our remaining time on the beach, crossing and recrossing the log jam searching for and pulling out any debris we can find. Finding debris is not hard. There are plastic bottles, nets, buoys, Styrofoam, and brightly colored pieces of unidentifiable plastic shredded by the ocean all buried in the log jam. We gather this myriad of plastic by pulling it from between logs, scooping it out of the sand, spotting it through the wrack line, bagging it and taking it to one of the piles that now mark the edges of the zones. Behind us a second team comes to sort through the piles. Gore point is one of the study plots for GOAK. This means every piece of debris is sorted, counted, and weighed to help build an image of what plastic is entering our ocean and what happens to it once it is there. It is a time consuming process, but hugely important in fighting marine debris.

Over the next two days of bagging and sorting debris the weather became less pleasant while the beach became cleaner. We scramble, and drag, and see new debris come in with the wind. We dangle from the logs reaching deep into a pocket trying to grab a bottle, or float, or chunk of foam. We sit in the sand trying to get the Styrofoam that has broken into beads on the beach. What is an efficient transportable way to sort foam from spruce needles and sand? We spent a good amount of time on the boat at night trying to solve that puzzle. If you have an idea let me know!

On the third day we finished all seven zones by following each other through them to catch what the person in front of us inevitably missed. Then we moved all of the trash we gathered back into the forest to avoid re-scattering by the wind. The small group that was doing the monitoring grows as we all work together sorting, counting, weighing and bagging. The debris ends up in super sacks: tough cubic yard sacks that can be taken away and loaded on a barge by a helicopter. We end up filling 12 of them. I don't have all the numbers yet, but inside those bags were hundreds of floats and buoys, shoes, rope, nets, and over 2000 plastic water bottles. That night the wind won't let our plane come get us and the next morning the clouds won't let our plane take off. We are off to Elizabeth Island where we clean the beach while samples are taken to study plastics in the lake and their effect on salmon. That evening the weather is good and the Otter returns to take us back to Homer.

Gore Point helps protect Kachemak Bay, catching a lot of the debris that could end up here - but we still have debris here as well. Each fall hundreds of volunteers help us with our Coast Walk effort, cleaning up debris along the beaches of Kachemak Bay. Either as a group, a class, or individual, anyone can help with the effort right here at home. Our Coast Walk program gives citizens a chance to help clean the shores as well as collect data that can be used to promote stewardship of our marine resources.