

The Center for Alaska Coastal Studies Turns 40
Decade 1 (1982-1992): Laying the Foundation
By Marilyn Sigman

For many Alaska schools, a journey to Peterson Bay Field Station on the south shore of Kachemak Bay is an annual tradition. Students search at low tide for sea stars, octopus, and nudibranchs; learn about forest plants; and eat s'mores around a campfire. This pilgrimage began soon after the China Poot Bay Society (CPBS) was incorporated as a non-profit corporation in 1982.

The founders—Mike and Diane McBride, Steve Yoshida, and Janet and Bob Klein—were concerned about the ecological future of Kachemak Bay and other coastal areas. Their timing was inspired by an opportunity to lease and eventually purchase two acres of beachfront land and the half-finished home of Donna and Dr. James Wong in Peterson Bay. Janet Klein remembers hours of conversation and filling out non-profit paperwork over endless cups of Market Spice tea. Steve Yoshida remembers sharing pizzas. The vision was a center for environmental education and field study with an outdoor classroom and laboratory of diverse coastal and forest habitats a short walk away. Education, they thought, would be the key to responsible stewardship of coastal resources.

In 1983, volunteer educators taught the first Alaska Coastal Ecology field trip program to 76 Paul Banks Elementary 4th graders. During the summer of 1985, 44 volunteer naturalists guided day tours for 500+ visitors. Despite the uncertainty of future income, CPBS signed a purchase agreement that year.

The organization's early success depended on its wealth of devoted volunteers who believed in its mission. They pitched in to serve on the Board of Directors, donate and raise money, and share all types of knowledge and skills to provide boat transportation, transform the building into the Peterson Bay Field Station education center, develop a trail system, and teach. A tiny budget stretched some years to hire talented resident naturalists like Liz and Mike Horn and Conrad and Carmen Field.

The urgency of having “a dry space for kids to sleep” and the impetus for fun, hands-on educational experiences for all came from the first volunteer Education Director Daisy Lee Bitter, who had pioneered field trips to China Poot Bay earlier (spring 1982) as an Anchorage teacher. By the mid-1980s, CPBS environmental education programs began receiving state and national recognition for excellence.

Volunteering to work “across the Bay” initially meant being dropped off on the beach to either scramble across slippery seaweeds, slosh through high tides, or crawl over boulders to get to the building. Amateur carpentry skills led to creative architecture. A small floating dock came later, along with an inventive human-powered pulley system to get to shore on a raft. Toby Tyler found a trail that led to a jewel of a small lake, but lost his way several times. The name Lost and Found Lake stuck. Some volunteers learned about tide cycles the hard way. Most fell in love with the place forever.

Fifteen volunteers walked Kachemak Bay beaches in fall, 1984, on their first CoastWalk, armed with a monitoring checklist and trash bags. The 1989 CoastWalk had a grimmer purpose; CACS mobilized more than 200 people to conduct Coastwalk surveys of the entire Kachemak Bay shoreline before and after oil arrived from the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. The experience reinforced the decision in 1988 to rename the organization the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies (CACS) to reflect ecological connections and concerns broader than those within China Poot Bay.

By 1992, CACS had a rented office space in downtown Homer. KBBi listeners heard Daisy Lee Bitter broadcasting *Kachemak Currents* programs weekly. A large floating dock had been installed in Peterson Bay and CACS had a new opportunity before it—to develop a wildlife preserve and nature center on East Skyline Drive.

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For more information about the history of CACS and the people who helped make it happen, and upcoming 40th Anniversary events and educational programs, see the CACS website: <http://akcoastalstudies.org>.