Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

March 2024

Sea Kayaking in the Deep South: Antarctica!

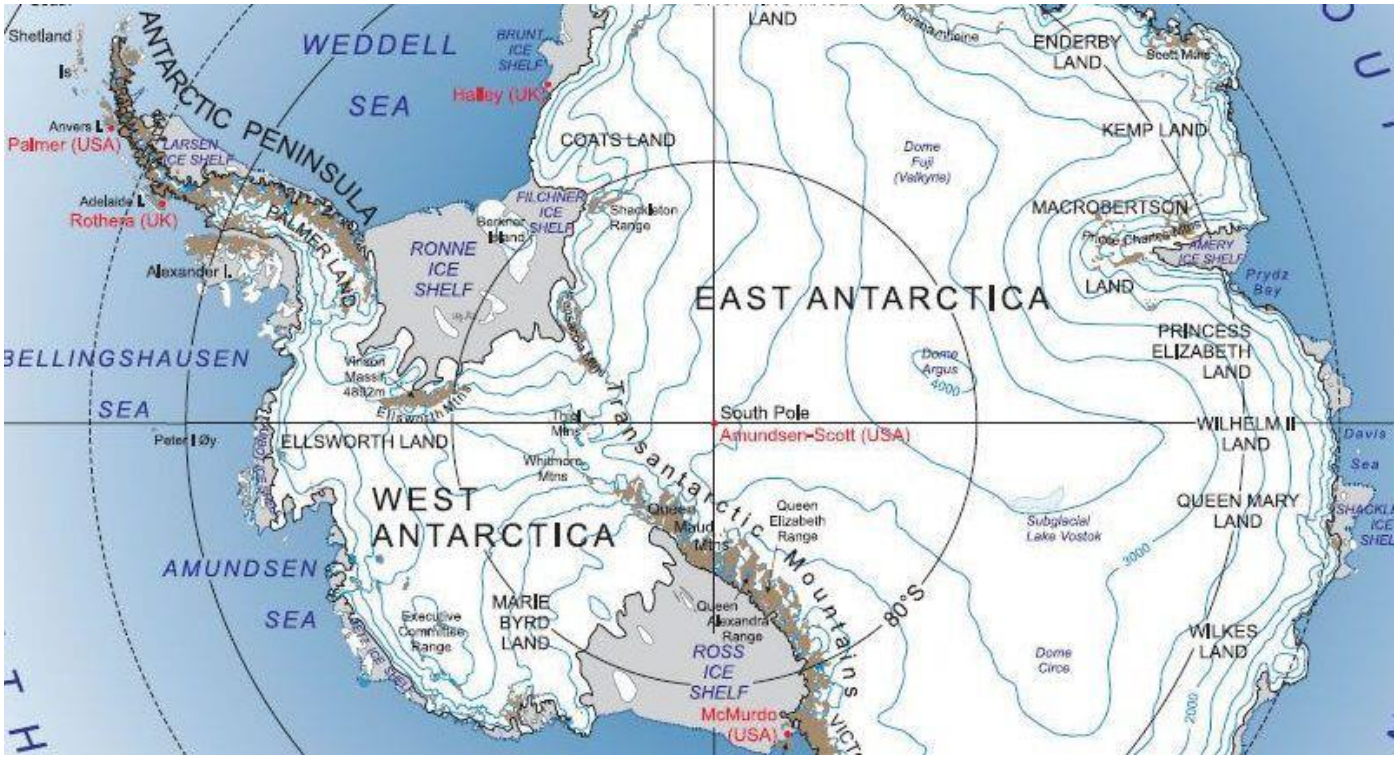
Michael Gray and Lisa Deziel

The Drake Quake

Traveling to Antarctica is like going to space…it can be both inhospitable and inaccessible, yet you can go there as a tourist. Eric Lindblad first offered trips here on an old ice breaker in the 1990s and pioneered tourism on the ice-encrusted continent. How to get there? It all starts with transcontinental flights south to get to the ports of Ushuaia, Argentina or Punta Arenas, Chile. From there you board a polar-capable vessel to cross the Drake Passage. The Antarctic Peninsula reaches its finger up toward the bottom tip of South America, the legendary Cape Horn. Antarctica may appear tantalizingly close, but still lies two to three days sail from the port of Ushuaia, Tierra Del Fuego. Crossing through those Southern Ocean latitudes and the "Furious Fifties" across the Antarctic Convergence can be a sporty ride. You may encounter the "Drake Lake", but more likely you'll be met by the "Drake Quake". Think tossed salad and you're the greens and you don't even want to know about the dressing. A moderate crossing may have three-to-four-meter seas, but 16-meter seas (50+ feet!) are not that unusual necessitating a very hearty polar-class vessel.

The Peninsula

This Peninsula is home to many of our planet's penguins and during the Antarctic summer it is often free enough from sea ice to be navigable. But the only way for a person to paddle these sub-32 F degree waters around the Antarctic Peninsula is from a mothership base. Sea water freezes at about 28. 4 degrees F and paddling here is a very intimate immersion experience. No one experiences this place the way a paddler does. You are one with, not apart from, in this environment. Being dressed to swim, hands dipping into icy blue water, nosing through tinkling brash ice, getting used to using



pogies…there is just nothing like it. Weather always rules aboard ships in these waters and an experienced Polar captain teamed with the right expedition leader can often find sheltered paddling in the midst of a Force 7 blow (27 – 33 kts).

Some Background

Human history in the Southern Continent is very recent, with most of taking place in the last century or so. Not all went as explorers…some went for the money. Before electric lighting was widely available, human civilization largely depended on seal and whale oil for lighting. At the turn of the 20th century, there was a rush to the Southern Ocean to work in sealing and whaling stations. The whaling station at Grytviken, on the island of South Georgia, was even equipped with electric lights and hot showers…powered by burning blubber oils from the seemingly plentiful animals there. In an ironic twist, without Edison, Tesla and all the copper extracted from Michigan's upper Peninsula, the whale and seal populations may have never recovered from the slaughter. Now Grytviken is carpeted with seals who have reclaimed their home and whales are frequently seen around the island. Further south on the continent proper, you'll find remains of whaling stations, along with explorers' huts and 70 permanent research bases staffed on and off by 29 different countries.

A Light Footprint

On any given day from January till March there may be as many as 50 vessels dancing around each other here. Ship traffic around the Peninsula is managed via a satellite-based, real-time scheduling program that enables expedition leaders to book individual landing sites and give each group room to explore. Extremely stringent operational rules (think Leave No Trace on steroids) help ensure a feeling that it's just you there with the ice sculptures and 20,000 Gentoo penguins, but that is a finely crafted illusion. A lot of credit is due the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) for setting standards that really do mean a very light footprint for visitors.

You can certainly pick your level of challenge from a wide array of vessels: from 12-person sailing

Photo: Lisa Deziel

Yachts that average 25-30 meters up to floating 5-star hotels with up to 500 people. The comfort zone for paddlers is somewhere in between, but less definitely means more in terms of both time on land and in a kayak. Vessels carrying more than 250 people are not allowed to land and landings are kept to 100-person maximum by IAATO rules. So in terms of comfort, flexibility and access, the sweet spot is a ship that supports around 100-150 passengers.

A Typical Agenda

A typical 10-day trip will have you spending 2.5 days to cross the Drake, 4.5 days exploring the Peninsula and South Shetlands. During this time, you may be able to get out to paddle seven or eight times if weather allows. This leaves a two- or three-day window to cross back to meet the pilot boat through the Beagle Channel (named after Darwin's ship) and back to the port of Ushuaia. Longer trips can explore the entire Earnest Shackleton route to the Peninsula, on to Elephant Island in the South Shetlands, then two days sail to South Georgia (home to 80% of the planet's Antarctic Fur seals) and possibly the Falklands (Las Malvinas) before another two days sail back to port for a 20–22-day trip.

A three-week voyage like this is a big commitment in both time and funds (think $20,000+). But in terms of wildlife and raw beauty, it is without equal.

During the Antarctic summer of January-March, you will have 18+ hours of daylight to explore. A typical day has you waking to light streaming in through the porthole at around 4 am which has you ready to grab a coffee at 6, breakfast at 7 and ready to stretch a drysuit gasket over your head around 8:30. Once suited and booted, you'll queue up to launch a kayak over the side of a zodiac (inflatable boat) off the marina of a ship for 1.5-2 hours of paddling time. You'll cruise amongst icebergs, bergy bits, tidewater glaciers and through crystal blue waters oft filled with porpoising penguins, sea birds and seals. At times it is like being in a cauldron of wildlife boiling with movement, sound and extreme smells. Your senses will be overloaded as you head back to the ship, peel out of your drysuit and head for the bathroom now that your morning coffee has percolated all the way through. Take a lunch break as the ship heads for a new scheduled parking spot for an afternoon session where you'll get to do it all over again in a new locale.

No one owns Antarctica. The Antarctic Treaty that was signed in 1957/58 currently has 56 signatories allowing for scientific study. Mining is prohibited as is commercial fishing. It is supposed to be a land of peace, shared by all. That said, it is a friendly agreement with no real oversight and many countries who may or may not have signed the treaty do engage in large scale Krill fisheries there as well as some limited whaling. Also, many signatories have historical overlapping territorial claims, but it is all fairly peaceful. The continent is covered in places by miles of ice, banking huge amounts of freshwater and hiding a great deal of mineral wealth, so given human history, its future is uncertain.

Photo: Lisa Deziel

The Paddling

What is the paddling like? Most companies offer a couple of options. Enthusiasts can pre-book kayaking as an extra activity ($800-$1500) for those who want to take up every opportunity that nature allows to get out and play in the ice. This usually requires some sort of previous experience and possibly a rescue clinic. The second option is one where you can sign up on board for more casual outings where you'll get to dip a paddle a few times in calm weather.

There is a serious learning curve here. You'll gain new skills as you squeak your legs over the rubber tube of a zodiac to drop down into a kayak seat. Since we often encounter winds well over 20 knots and bumpy seas to go with; we often use a Zodiac to tow chains of kayaks to a more sheltered launch location, whether it be behind a small island or a group of building-sized ice bergs. Utilizing a "Zuber" also gives us the ability to do one-way or downwind paddles to catch a ride back. Guide ratios for trips like this are usually 1:10, not our usual organizational standards. For this reason, most trips primarily use tandem kayaks. But once guides get to know your skill set, they may give you an opportunity to paddle a plastic single. Tandems do have an advantage here…both easier to launch off a zodiac and a great platform to shoot photos from. Not only will you be able to bring that big lens, but you have a partner to move you into better position for those stunning photos. You may also have a dedicated safety Zodiac scouting and shadowing your group.

Photo: Lisa Deziel

Background

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Landings

While paddling in these environs is a privilege, that doesn't mean that you'll get to land. At present, Avian Influenza (HPAI) has made its way to Antarctica via sea birds and has spread to penguin and seal populations resulting in tragic wildlife die offs. Like Covid, it is spread through bodily fluids and feces that can end up imbedded in boot soles. Many landing sites are closed. We do not want to be part of the problem, risking the lives of the very wildlife that we've gone to such great lengths to encounter. Going ashore means strict bio-security measures for boot cleaning and disinfecting which is very difficult to manage when boots go into

A landing with Chinstrap penguins Photo: Lisa Deziel

kayaks. For the time being, kayak groups have maintained a closed loop by not landing and keeping their clean booties in their hulls. So, for landings, we return to the ship, change into insulated Muck boots, walk through a disinfectant foot bath and motor to a landing via Zodiac. We return through another foot bath and scrubbing. It may require a lot of effort, but those efforts yield serious rewards. A visit to a penguin colony is unlike any other wildlife encounter you will ever have. Think: communing with nature, not just looking at it. Although the smell could peel paint off a steel hull, stepping over a penguin highway, watching them bobsled down snowy slopes, trill at you with curiosity, preen and steal pebbles from each other's nests is an experience that will leave you awestruck. Plus, animal babies…penguin chicks are cuter than cartoons. So worth it.

Life Aboard a Ship

On board one of the sail yachts, you'll be an integral part of the crew, helping stand watch and learning how to be in very big seas in a very small boat. One of the smaller modern stabilizer-equipped expedition vessels will have you in very comfortable cabins with your own bathroom with crazy good food, a pleasant bar and lots of room to roam. Breakfast and lunches are usually served buffet style with at least a dozen choices covering any diet style imaginable. Dinners are usually chosen from a menu and served later in the day after lots of activity. If you can keep ahead of the

stewards topping off your wine glass every ten minutes, you'll be ready to do it all again the next day. You'll share the ship with crew who take care of you and keep the ship working and on track. The expedition team on board of naturalists, historians, photographers, geologists and activity specialists like kayak and mountaineering guides are there to help you take that deep dive into this extreme environment.

Shackleton

The Shackleton story is not new to anyone who has read "Endurance". It is the most famous "failed" expedition of recorded history. During a nearly two year period of getting their ship stuck, then crushed in the ice, dragging lifeboats to open water, making their way across hundreds of miles of open water to another extremely inhospitable place to land, boss sails off in the lifeboat with the captain and photographer 1200 miles to another small island to find help, lands on the wrong size, has to go over a mountain range to a whaling station on the other side, then raise money to get back to south America to get a rescue boat to go find his crew, many months later. They all survived. A true tale of leadership, tenacity, courage and human spirit….and one you can't help but re live as you explore these waters.

A Good Time to Go

As kayakers, we are all explorers, driven by the urge to see what is around that next headland; it is simply part of our nature. We have an opportunity on the horizon. Expedition Cruise companies started adding more ships to their fleets pre-Covid. What that means right now is that there are more seats than bookings right now. The practical upshot for you is that for the next couple of years, there may be some deals to be had on less crowded ships for a lifetime experience trip. Going to the moon may not be on your bucket list, but you might consider making the commitment to traveling to the deep, deep south to experience the otherworldly nature of the Southern Continent.

Michael Gray helming the zodiac. Photo: Lisa Deziel

In This Issue

Photo: Lisa Deziel

A Cuban Adventure

Rick Leader and Bonnie Gease

January 2024 found us wandering around Havana Cuba, luggage in hand, Spanish severely lacking, trying to hook up with our missing guide. When we take a trip pitched as ecotourism, we always work hard to make sure there is legitimate "eco" in the ecotourism. For this cultural tourism trip, we were sensitive to making sure that there was plenty of cultural interaction and that we were not just using our American dollars to take advantage of a very poor country and a population that has few reasons to like us.

All trepidation faded as we recovered from the missed connection with our guide thanks to charade communications with at least a dozen friendly Cubans who directed us through a four mile walk along the back streets of Havana to a successful rendezvous.

The Context

We were on an eight-day trip with Cuba Unbound, a ROW affiliated tour company. Our traveling companions ran into last-minute passport issues, so for the entire trip we had our two guides all to ourselves. "Harry" and "David" were fantastic, well educated in English, history, kayaking and nature and very willing to discuss cultural issues at length. David had been an international kayak racing competitor in college.

Guiding is a critical source of income for many residents from doctors to teachers. Everyone we met seemed to survive on a variety of side gigs. U.S. restrictions on travel to Cuba have dramatically reduced Cuba's tourism economy. We were traveling on a tourist visa for educational travel and support of the Cuban people. Our trip ranged over 150 miles from Havana to Playa Larga,

Cienfuegos and Trinidad on the central southern coast.

The Paddling

We paddled five of the eight days and spent one day snorkeling at Playa Giron in the Caribbean Sea. Our paddles were nature explorations by design, we poked around every nook and cranny along the shorelines and through the red and black mangrove marshes. Daily paddle distances ranged from five to nine miles. It would be easy to plan a more aggressive paddle agenda and spend more time in the ocean. We were provided with the usual resort variety of 16' Necky kayaks and Werner paddles. PFDs, pumps and tow ropes were provided.

Paddle locations included: the Bay of Pigs at the small village of Playa Larga; Zapata National Park; Rio Guaurabo outside Trinidad, which flows from mountains to sea; Laguna de Guanaroca-Yaguanabo-El Nicho, a 10,000 acre protected marsh where visitors are limited to 50 per day; and the Bay of Cienfuegos. Generally we found water quality to

Cuban Coast. Photo: Bonnie Gease

be high and had no concerns. There was little boat traffic as boating is severely restricted in Cuba. Water was calm and tides and currents were not an issue.

Environment and Wildlife

Every paddle was worthy of a repeat visit. Zapata and Laguna de Guanaroca are internationally important natural areas. Much of the habitat was similar to Florida's mangrove swamps with the addition of mountain backdrops in the distance. Birds were in abundance with highlights being the Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Emerald Hummingbird, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Roseate Spoonbill, Ibis, Anhinga, Pink Flamingo and White and Brown Pelicans. At an island lunch stop in Zapata we got up close and personal with Cuban Rock Iguanas and Desmrest's Hutia or tree rats thanks to the guide's bag of fruit trimmings.

Cuban Rock Iguana. Photo: Bonnie Gease

Side trips included tours of amazing historic buildings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries combined with opulent buildings built with North American money during the early 1900's in old Havana, Trinidad and Cienfuegos; an inspiring visit with a local Trinidad artist; art academy dance and music performances; the Cienfuegos botanical garden; a local's backyard hummingbird oasis; the Bay of Pigs Museum, sobering to say the least; and the former home of Ernest Hemingway. We only scratched the surface of possibilities.

Havana Photo: Bonnie Gease

Traveling in Cuba

Travel in Cuba requires a flexible attitude: roads can be terrible, plumbing is delicate, air conditioning is spotty, toiletries are difficult to find, venue opening and closing times are fluid, and there is little internet access. Forget using Google Maps.

American credit cards are not accepted and there are no ATM machines for U.S. banking. It is strongly

encouraged not to check baggage, so we traveled light. The fluctuating value of Cuban pesos was impossible to get a handle on, but U.S. dollars were often accepted.

Roads carried a wild hodgepodge of cars and trucks, bikes, low powered scooters, and horse drawn carriages. The average Cuban does not own a car. The often-featured historic American classic cars were everywhere. There were scant street and road signs. Everyone went with the flow and private cars as opportunistic taxis worked hard to fill gaps.

Our accommodations were a wide mix. We spent two nights in large government hotels, but the rest of the time we stayed in small family run motels/AirB&B's. Delicious meals were at family restaurants. We could count on a side of soup and rice and beans with every meal. We were served plenty of fish, delectable pork and occasionally shredded beef. This might be a challenging country for a strict vegetarian. Mojitos reigned supreme.

At our first Airbnb our hosts were a Cuban woman with a little English and her former-aerospace engineer Ukrainian boyfriend who spoke a little French. Lots of smiling and pointing and we were in business. Thank goodness the digital locks all had recognizable numbers. The small family "motels" typically had five or six rooms and a casual eating area. Mom handled check-in, Dad was doing repairs, sons and daughters were in the kitchen, cousins handled serving and cleaning. Everyone was very friendly, but the language barrier made any significant conversation impossible. Our guides knew the families well and happily pointed out all the connections between the family members and how hard they had all worked to maintain a business in Cuba with layers of government requirements and supply problems.

Street poster. Photo: Bonnie Gease

Cuban citizens want what we all want: to provide for their families, help them heal when they are sick (there are great doctors in Cuba, but little medicine) and see a future for the children. We look forward to future visits with our new friends.

If You Go

It would be hard to do this trip without the support of a local outfitter. We chose Cuba Unbound - http://wwwrowadventures.com. Your passport must have an expiration date more than 6 months away. You need a "general license" or visa based on one of twelve categories of travel. Ours was provided by the outfitter for "support for the Cuban people". Health insurance is required and a minimum policy is included in your plane ticket fare. Seventy-two hours before your flight you must complete an online passenger information form with health information. Evacuation and travel insurance is highly recommended. We flew Southwest Airlines from Ft. Lauderdale there are also flights from Miami.

The Efficiency of Trust

Tom Noffsinger

I was reminded recently of the "efficiency of trust." It's a phrase I've come to appreciate with work, family and friends. The refresher came when Dale Williams, Kathryn Lapolla and I paddled out into the surf off the south end of Tybee Island in late January. It was foggy – visibility was a few hundred feet at most, and there was no sign of it burning off.

We paddled out with the ebb current, made stronger by the full moon, and the tide races were starting to form between the sandbars. For those who don't paddle where rivers meet the sea, that means your kayak (and you if you're in the water) are carried out to sea rather than in toward the beach. The waves were 3-4 feet, so not huge, but enough to knock you around if you got out of position.

Normally, that's part of the fun, but things quickly get more complicated when you can't see the shore or where the waves are breaking over the sandbar. It's hard to get lost out there, but it's easy to get confused and start doubting what you know to be true.

Heavy fog. Photo; Tom Noffsinger

That's where the efficiency of trust comes in. When you're paddling with others you trust – their skills, decision-making, empathy, and grace under pressure – you can focus on enjoying the moment or handling the unexpected. You aren't wasting mental or emotional energy worrying about items that can reside under the trust umbrella. So when I lost sight of Kathryn for several minutes, I knew that if I moved into position north of the wave train we were surfing, she would also work her way in that direction. Both of us trusting the other to do the smart thing. That was much more efficient than paddling around in and out of the break, hoping to spot each other in the small window of visibility.

We reconnected and kept surfing and smiling.

I had a similar experience with trust and efficiency when Drew Trousdell and I paddled 140 miles from Valdez to Whittier, Alaska, in 2011. It was an adventure that could have easily changed into a survival story as we encountered multiple days of high winds and heavy seas in a remote area of Prince William Sound.

Because of our unwavering trust in each other – we had already paddled together for hundreds of hours, including overnight kayak camping trips and multi-day surf excursions – we didn't waste time second-guessing each other or talking decisions to death. We were able to make smart decisions in the moment, trust each other's skills and decision-making, and conserve our physical and emotional energy to address the immediate challenges in front of us.

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PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND
400 AM AKDT WED AUG 3 2011
...GALE WARNING THROUGH TONIGHT...
.TODAY...SE WIND 45 KT. SEAS 10 FT. RAIN.
.TONIGHT...SE WIND 40 KT DIMINISHING TO 30 KT AFTER MIDNIGHT. SEAS
9 FT SUBSIDING TO 6 FT AFTER MIDNIGHT. RAIN.
.THU...SE WIND 20 KT. SEAS 4 FT. RAIN.
.THU NIGHT...S WIND 25 KT. SEAS 6 FT.
.FRI...SW WIND 20 KT. SEAS 4 FT.
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Tom and Drew's Prince William Sound forecast

That efficiency paid off when we had to make a snap decision to retreat to the protection of a lee shore in the face of huge seas and rapidly deteriorating conditions, adjusting our plans on the fly and finding a new landing zone and camp spot. There were several other critical decisions on that trip that were less stressful due to the efficiency of trust.

The benefits of trust and efficiency aren't limited to dangerous situations. Streamlining decisions and eliminating worries and unproductive thoughts results in stronger focus and living in the moment, ultimately bringing you closer to unconscious competence paddling.

Trust doesn't come naturally to most of us. And when it does happen, it's easy to overlook the subtle efficiency that comes with mutual trust.

Fog and brash ice in Prince William Sound. Photo; Tom Noffsinger

Photos of the Month

Tobacco Caye Belize

Photo: Laurie Collins

Photos of the Month

Oregon Coast

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

Photos of the Month

East Greenland Bergs

Photo: Rick Wiebush

Key Largo to Key West

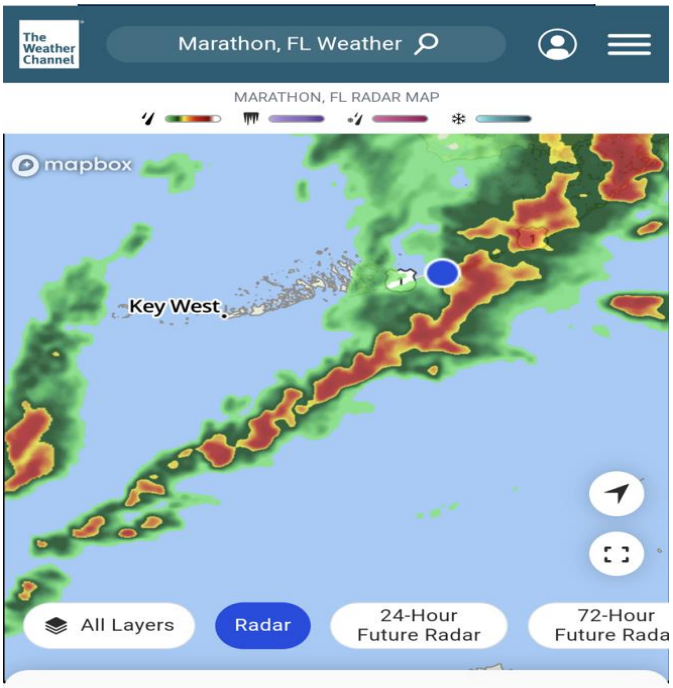
Karen Wilson

The weather for the start of our trip with the Burnhams was perfect - clear blue skies and light winds to send us on our way. We were all excited to begin our journey through the Florida Keys – 120 miles from Key Largo to Key West - leaving the memory of grey skies and wintry weather in the north behind us.

Things changed quickly and frequently. Our perfect weather was short-lived due to a few days that had strong storms move through the Keys.

Some Challenging Conditions

One day, after the storms had passed, Bill took the group for an eight-mile end-to-end paddle. He was careful to explain what the conditions were so that every paddler could make an informed choice. The plan was to go about three miles and then decide if it was safe to proceed. The temperatures were cool that day and the winds were gusting up to gale force. Rebecca and I opted not to paddle, feeling certain the group would return cold and wet after their test paddle. Fortunately, the group was mostly



protected from the north winds on the south (ocean) side of the island. Well, until the end of the paddle, when they had to head out to a point and pass through a constricted area between a small island and shore. There were five-foot waves and confused seas rebounding off the stone jetty. As Bill described it afterwards, "It was every man for himself." Thankfully, everyone managed to make it through safely.

The paddling conditions were not usually that challenging, but one afternoon a couple of us paddled to check out a Flagler railroad bridge and the parallel U.S. 1 highway bridge. The current passing under the bridges was strong and when I looked over, Jill was kissing the pier of the old bridge. Rather than fight the current, she and J.J. slipped to the other side. Laure Bowman and I were paddling hard to make forward progress and maintain a safe distance from the bridge piers. It was then that I saw Bill had set a ferry angle and was not working hard at all. I followed suit and was amazed at how easy it was – a light bulb moment for sure.

Some Challenging Packing

Kayak camping requires organized packing and diligent selection of what to bring. Many of us in this group had NDK boats which have round hatch openings. This really limits the size of the bags you can shove in those spaces. Small dry bags (3-, 5- & 10-liter bags) work best. Our bags were separated by paddle clothes, camp clothes, rain gear, warm layers, toiletries, and chargers. We were told to limit our personal gear to one hatch so water, food, and camp gear could be stashed in the other hatches. Fortunately for us, all the food was provided by our guides. Initially I thought that we would only need warm weather clothing but was advised to pack a warm hat and a packable down jacket... the jacket also doubled as a pillow when stuffed in a dry sack. For those that brought their own tents, we were told to purchase heavy duty stakes that could be pounded into the hard coral bedrock that often made up the islands we were camping on.

Campsite critters can be an issue too. When setting up camp at the John Pennekamp State Park we were warned about leaving any food in our kayaks or even leaving a wrapper in our life vests as the raccoons will find it and chew through anything to get their treat. We were still sitting around the campfire when the raccoons showed up. They are bold little buggers, and it took a fair amount of convincing for them to leave our camp site.

Loaded and ready to go. Photo: Karen Wilson

Staying Flexible, Staying Safe

This marks the 18th time Mary and Bill Burnham have guided this 120-mile, 10-day kayak camping trip from Key Largo to Key West. Their first trip came in 2010, and for several years they led trips twice each winter. This level of experience shows: concerns for safety are paramount, as is the need for flexibility. For example, some of the storms required last minute changes to the itinerary and lodging.

During one storm we opted for breakfast at a coffee shop and rode out the storm in a replica of Ernest Hemingway's boat "Pilar" inside a Bass Pro shop. Even the roosters were taking shelter from the storm. No one was upset about changes to the itinerary. We all understood that safety came first. Bill and Mary carefully reviewed the weather conditions, tides and routes each evening and again each morning to ensure we were safe to proceed and made adjustments to the paddling plan if needed. For example, we had a planned crossing of open water at the Seven Mile Bridge with camping on a private island halfway across. The Burnhams had reviewed the potential weather challenges the week before and booked an alternate site which proved quite prudent. Paddling open water that day was out of the question.

Shelter from the storm" Photo: Mary Burnham

According to Bill and Mary another "flexibility" challenge has become finding suitable campsites. Traditional campgrounds are being sold and turned into expensive resorts, leaving fewer options available.

The Group

We had four Cross Currents "UnCon" grads on this trip: Rebecca FitzSimons, Jill Albritton, Laure Bowman and Karen Wilson. Others in the group included Eileen Lenkman, a river/white water paddler from Missouri, and two friends from Syracuse, N.Y., Mike DiBella and J.J. Maderos. They normally paddle and kayak camp on the Adirondacks.

As we island hopped our way through the Keys we really bonded as a group. Everyone was pitching in wherever assistance was needed, moving equipment, boats, setting up tents, helping with dinner and dishes, etc. On Tarpon Belly Key (one of the primitive camping islands) Laure Bowman and I fetched firewood and J.J. used his negotiation skills to score a six pack of ice-cold Corona from our well stocked neighbors.

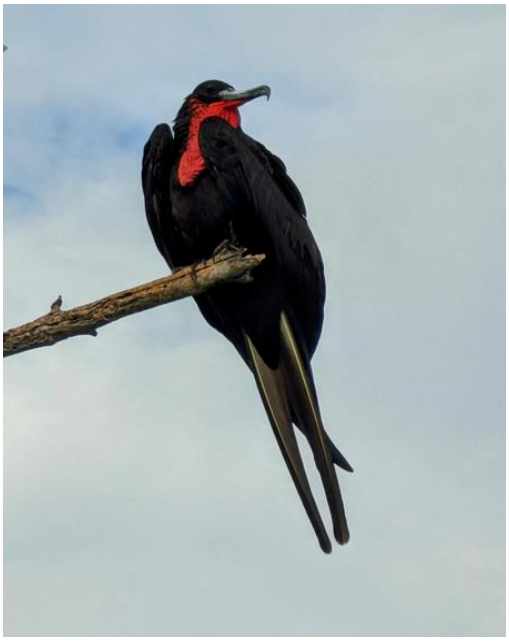

Score! Photo: Karen Wilson

Mary Burnham on
The UnCon Connection

Bill and I value group cohesiveness and personal responsibility especially on a trip this long and difficult," said Mary Burnham. "It became clear very early on that having four Un Con graduates would make this a special trip. They came 'fully-formed 'so to speak."

Nothing illustrated this more than taking on roles like sweep during our long open water crossings, noted Bill Burnham. "When we asked someone to take sweep, they knew exactly what to do. It's a critical role, almost like leading from behind."

"We often say this trip is not a vacation, it's an expedition," said Mary. "We expect everyone to pitch in. This particular group gelled like few others have in our 15 years guiding the trip."



Frigate bird. Photo: Karen Wilson

Lots of Wildlife

During our travels we saw the usual birds one would expect in the keys (Little Blue Herons, Great White Herons, Terns, etc.) but we were in for a big treat when we glided under a roosting male Frigate bird in breeding plumage. This is a rare sight. Other wildlife sightings included Key Deer (who like to lick dew from tents), Sea Hare (Sea Slug) and Cassiopea (upside down jellyfish). Of course, a trip to the Keys would not be complete without manatees, dolphins, sharks and rays.

Sea slug. Photo: Karen Wilson

Cassiopea. Photo: Karen Wilson

A Quirky Place

The Keys have an interesting and quirky history. Bill and Mary were happy to share their knowledge and stories with us as we traveled through the islands. There is the infamous story of the old Flagler Railroad which met its demise during the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane that brough estimated winds of 200 mph and a storm surge of 30 feet. To give you a sense of the devastation that would have caused, the average height of the Keys is 8 ft above sea level with a maximum height of 18 ft.

Can we talk about the Key West roosters? Yes, they are beautiful and protected by city law, but just know if you are planning to camp, they start their crowing about 3 a.m. and continue throughout the day. They seem to have a lot to say at all hours of the day and night. If you are a light sleeper, earplugs are advised.

There were countless signs of past storms that left boats, homes, and landscapes in varying degrees of decay.

Roosters. Photo: Bill Burnham

Wrecks. Photo: Karen Wilson

Toilet Seat Cut. Photo: Karen Wilson

Throughout much of the history of the Keys there has been little regulation and people did as they pleased without government oversight. This included a man who dredged his own shortcut through an area that had been too shallow for his boat to pass through. He marked his cut with white posts and a storm in the 1960s deposited a toilet seat on one of his posts. That was all the inspiration people needed. Soon after that first toilet seat, embellished/personalized seats started appearing and so it was that Toilet Seat Cut in Islamorada was born. Clearly this is an example of American creativity at its finest.

We'll Do It Again

In the end we did not paddle all 120 miles, but it didn't matter. We had fun the whole time, stayed safe, ate well and made great new friends. Bill and Mary make it look easy, but it takes years of experience and teamwork to pull off a trip of this magnitude. We are already planning next year's trip with the Burnhams. The Everglades Wilderness Waterway – eight days primitive kayak camping.

Salmon!

Scott Ramsey

These are dynamic times we are living in. Across the globe, we are witnessing the effects of a changing climate, including biodiversity loss, species extinction, and habitat loss. In 2023 alone, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, twenty-one species have gone extinct. The environmental issues we face are complex and entangled with ecologic, economic, and cultural implications. To adequately address these complexities, often requires a systems approach, one that recognizes the intricate relationships that exist among and between species. This holistic perspective appreciates how the *living* community (biotic), and the *non-living* (abiotic) community are intricately reliant on each other. One of the most iconic examples of these interconnections is the Pacific Salmon (*Oncorhynchus*).

Salmon Life Cycle

In many ways, Pacific Salmon are biological wonders, that have the capacity to adapt and transform from fresh water to salt water and back to their river. Enduring harsh winter conditions, salmon fry emerge from eggs laid in freshwater stream beds, called redds in Spring. In a process that is still somewhat of a mystery, the unique chemistry of the water and its location is imprinted on the small fish, helping them track their way back to this, their natal stream. Depending on the species, some will spend up to two years in fresh water, feeding on macro-invertebrates and running the gauntlet of predation before heading to the ocean.

Their time in fresh water is fraught with danger, from predator fish like the Dolly Varden, to an array of aerial attack from birds, like the Belted King Fishers who specialize in plucking small fry from streams. Their seaward migration is a continuous struggle for survival. In the ocean, as they feast on a range of invertebrates, plankton, crustaceans, and other fish, they are also prey to various fish and sea creatures, including Salmon Sharks, Orca, and Harbor Seals. Each species of salmon spends a different amount of time in the ocean before heading back to their river system.

Red/Sockeye salmon. Photo: the verge.com

Sometime after entering fresh water, they begin to transform, losing their silver ocean coloration. As they migrate up the river, against the current, each change in different ways as their bodies prepare for their final run. All systems are focused on making it to the spawning grounds. In this process, they assimilate their digestive system and no longer eat.

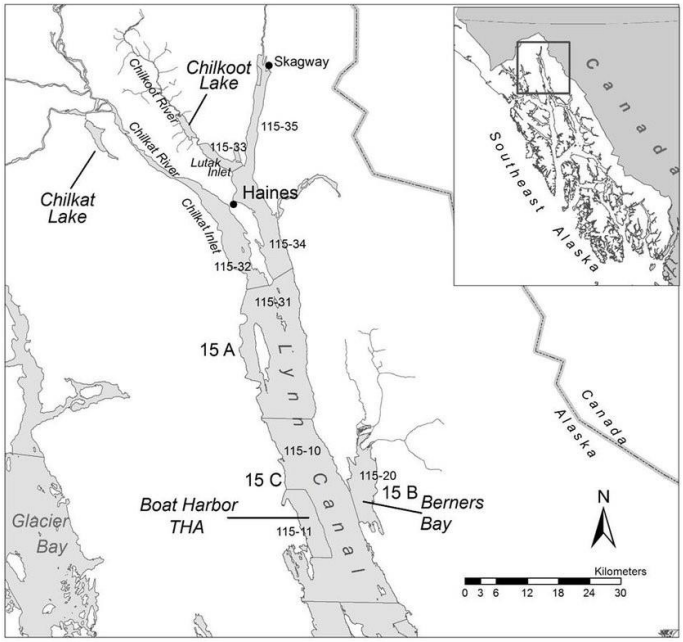
The metamorphous takes its toll. While resilient in many ways, unlike their biological cousins, the Atlantic Salmon *(Salmo salar)*, who can spawn multiple times, Pacific Salmon after returning to their stream of origin die soon after laying and fertilizing their eggs. This migration of salmon upstream is called a *run* and marks a unique ecological exchange.

Threats

For millennia, wild Pacific Salmon have been returning to their natal stream to spawn along the cold waters of the West Coast of the U.S. and Canada. More recently, however, in many places, salmon stocks have become depleted altogether or are endangered in many of these origin territories. For instance, according to the USGS, Coho, one of the five types of Pacific Salmon, may already be extinct in the lower Columbia River.

While the salmon fishery in general, are suffering from habitat loss and overfishing, there are places where many of the five species are still flourishing. There are numerous streams in Alaska and British Columbia that support one or two salmon species migrations. However, not many rivers support all five. The Chilkat River, located in Haines, Alaska is one of those special rivers.

The Chilkat River near Haines



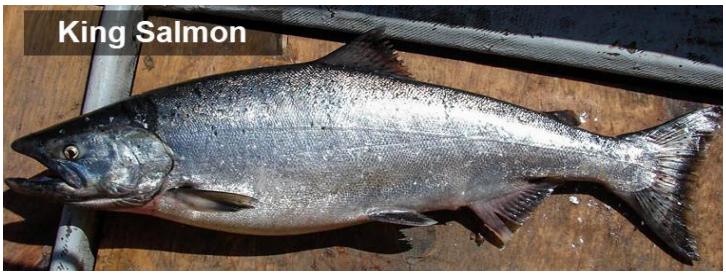
Haines and the Chilkat River

Nestled in the upper northern-end of the Lynn Canal, between ocean and glacier-capped mountains, sits Haines, or Deishu to the native population of Tlingits. The relatively small coastal town heavily relies on salmon as its economic backbone. Its bionetwork depends on the ecological benefits salmon provide. In addition, for generations, salmon have also gifted cultural significance to the people of this land.

What makes the Chilkat River so special? In general, to sustain all five species of Pacific Salmon requires clean and cold rivers. However, each of the five Pacific Salmon has their own unique ecological niche that most rivers cannot accommodate. But the Chilkat does that.

King Salmon

For instance, Chinook or King Salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), necessitate fast moving headwaters that have a certain size cobble for creating their redd, or bed in which to lay their eggs. After spending two years in fresh water, Chinook often spend three years at sea becoming the biggest of the Pacific Salmon, weighing up to 45lbs. They are typically the first of the salmon to



King/Chinook Salmon Photos: Asianrecipies.com

Sockeye/Red Salmon

Coho/Silver Salmon

return, arriving to their fresh water source sometime in April to early June, depending on the area and stream conditions. Their size and strength allow them to migrate the longest, into the upper reaches of the Chilkat and its tributaries.

Sockeye

Sockeye, or Red Salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*), spend one to four years in fresh water and one to three years in the ocean. Eating a specialized diet of krill, they are substantially smaller than the Chinook, weighing between 4-15lbs. During their migration from the sea, sockeye turn brilliant red and typically don't go as far as the headwaters of the river. Instead, sockeye, who depend heavily on lakes to lay their eggs and to rear their young, head to Chilkat Lake. To make it to the lake, sockeye have to navigate silty, ever-changing waters, where females will lay between 2-5,000 eggs before losing life force.

Coho

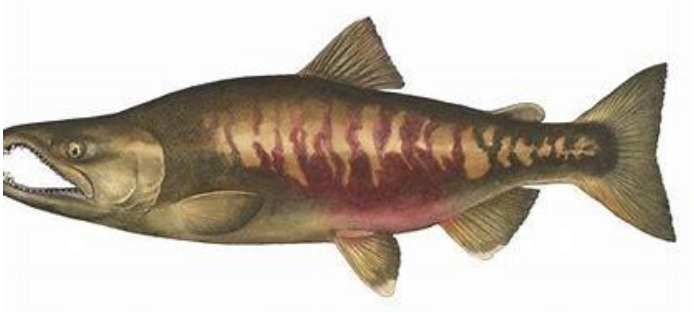
Spending one to three years in fresh water, Coho or Silver Salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), feed voraciously on a wide range of aquatic insects and plankton before heading to sea. While times may vary, most spend 1-2 years in the ocean, where their diet is mainly fish and squid. While they can weigh up to 30lbs, they typically weigh 8-12 lbs. As young salmon, they occupy a variety of different areas of the river, including shallow side channels off the margins, and slow pools with woody debris. Coho typically seem to have a high tolerance for silty water and can be found throughout the Chilkat River system.

Pink

Unlike Coho, Pink Salmon or Humpy (*Oncorhynchus gorbuscha)* prefer relatively small, clear channels to spawn. The smallest of the five salmon weigh 3-5lbs and average 20-25 inches in length. In general, Pink are the most abundant of the five salmon and can be found in lower reaches of the Chilkat, closest to the ocean. They also have the shortest lifespan, completing their life cycle in two years. Upon emerging from the gravel, young salmon fry head directly to the ocean. As they return to their natal spawning grounds, males develop enormous humps on the back and enlarged heads. Females lay between 1-2,000 eggs, defending their nest before dying.

Coho/Silver salmon

Pink/Humpy



Chum/Dog salmon Photo: Wild Salmon Center

Chum

The most widely distributed of all the Pacific Salmon is the Chum or Dog Salmon *(Oncorhynchus keta)*. One reason that Chum are so ubiquitous is they have a wide tolerance for different stream conditions and can spawn in silty water. Like Pinks, Chums head directly to the ocean after emerging from the gravel. However, during their 3-4 years at sea, Chum grow rapidly, weighing on average between 8-15 lbs. Due to their habitat flexibility, they can be found in a variety of sections of the Chilkat and can have an early and late run.

Ice-free River in Winter

A key to this late chum run is that there is a section of the Chilkat that doesn't freeze over even as late as October and November. When most rivers in Alaska are frozen, one section of the Chilkat River remains open, due to some fascinating hydro-geologic influences. A feeder river (the Tsirku) goes over porous sediment as it nears the Chilkat and finds its way through the sediment and into underwater aquifers. This water gets slightly heated by the earth through geothermal processes and eventually percolates back into the Chilkat River, below Klukwan. This heated water keeps the Chilkat River from freezing, even in the winter. This year-round water source provides an ice-free corridor for a late Chum salmon run, which offers food for the Tlingit village at Klukwan and supports the world's largest congregation of bald eagles, occurring here in late fall.

A Bald Eagle Bonanza

The open water and late chum run attract thousands of bald eagles– estimates range from 1,000 to 4,000 - to the Haines area for a feeding frenzy every year. It is the largest gathering of bald eagles in the world. (Interestingly, some authorities indicate that the name "Chilkat" means "salmon storehouse!)

The birds perch high in trees and on logs on the riverbanks and wait for the tides to recede. They then spot the salmon in shallower water, swoop down and snatch their prey to the riverbank where they enjoy a meal.

We started this article by talking about environmental issues and their impact on species. Those issues (e.g., fluctuating ocean temperatures) are evident with respect to salmon and the eagles on the Chilkat. Recent years have seen significant declines in the expected number of chum returning to the area and as a result the number of eagles showing up has also decreased.

Bald eagles along the Chilkat. Photo: Getty Images

Book Review

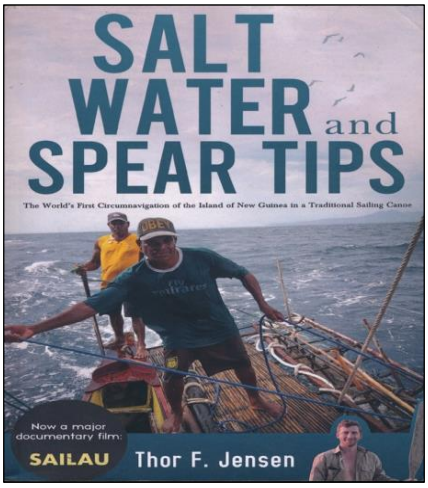
Saltwater and Spear Tips, by Thor Jensen

Paul Caffyn

The rear cover has the following summary:
'A Danish filmmaker, under the apprenticeship of three Papua New Guinea master sailors, set off from Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea, on the 30 August 2016, on a world-record circumnavigation of the island of New Guinea in a traditional sailing canoe called the *Tawali Pasana*. Over the course of 13 months and 21 days – and some 6,300 km of high adventure – what became known as 'the fellowship of the Tawali Pasana' created a modern-day odyssey (on a shoestring budget) battling relentless monsoon winds, dangerous seas, pirates and crocodiles. Prevailing against all odds, the voyage generated enormous media coverage and inspired the young people of New Guinea to celebrate their extraordinary seafaring culture.'

Thor's narrative is very readable, an engrossing account of the trials and tribulations of working with a crew of three experienced Milne Bay locals to sail a dugout canoe, with a single outrigger or ama, around New Guinea.

Fortunately early on, Thor got in touch with Aussie solo paddler Sandy Robson, as she neared the end of her five-year re-creation of Oscar Speck's folding boat voyage from Germany to Australia. She provided contacts, friendly and not friendly, and map info on the north coast. Because Thor failed to get a ticket of entry for a sailing vessel into Indonesian New Guinea waters, the ensuing wait of 89 days at Vanimo, resulted in a change in the seasonal winds from tailwind south-easterlies to monsoonal (nor-westerly) headwinds, thus slow progress to the western tip of NG.



Although Thor was making a film of the voyage, there is just a single team photo in the book, at the finish in October 2017. The black and white sketches by Thor are superb but I would have liked to see photos of the coastal folk met on the voyage and village life. Perhaps this is the teaser to seek out the documentary movie of the voyage. The maps are well drawn and illustrated, although some do need a magnifying glass to read the place names mentioned in the text.

The insights to the coastal dwellers around the island are wonderful insights into isolated village life, and the blokes in uniform with their bungling bureaucracy in Indonesian controlled western New Guinea. The story is very engaging, well written with the highs and lows experienced by Thor and his crew. A lovely quote from Sandy Robson, when Thor asked her for advice, '… if I hit rock bottom and don't want to go on?' Sandy told him to get a big block of chocolate and put it the one of his bags, and when 'you come to crunch time ….. get out the chocolate.'

There is certainly plenty of drama, but also plenty of wonderful interactions with local coastal dwellers, for whom travel by sailing canoe was part of their millennium old history.

Title: ***Saltwater and Spear Tips***
Subtitle: The World's First Circumnavigation of the Island of New Guinea in a Traditional Sailing Canoe.
Author: Thor F. Jensen
Published: 2020
Publisher: Pegasus Elliot Mackenzie
Contents: 438 pp, one photo, sketches, section maps
Cover: softcover
Size: 156 x 234 mm
ISBN: 978-1-784656-85-0
Availability: on-line websites
Cost: $10.51 on Amazon

Tawali Pasana underway. Photo: Paul Kerrison

Contributors

Paul Caffyn **- lives on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. In addition to being the first person to circumnavigate Australia in a sea kayak, he has circumnavigated the British Isles, New Zealand, New Caledonia and Japan and has done major expeditions in Alaska (the whole coast) and Greenland. Check out his website at http://paulcaffyn.co.nz/**

Lisa Deziel **– works with Michael Gray at UnCommon Adventures. Lisa is an ACA L4 Instructor and British Canoeing Sea Leader. She has explored the waters in the Everglades and the Florida Keys and has paddled and camped around the world, including Wales, Greenland, Iceland, Alaska, Canada, the Great Lakes, and Central America.**

Bonnie Gease **– is a graduate of Cross Currents "UnCon" program and in addition to Cuba, has undertaken expeditions in Baja, New Zealand, Portugal, Alaska and the Green River in Utah. Bonnie lives in Maryland.**

Michael Gray **– is the founder and owner of UnCommon Adventures. He's led trips all over the world including Alaska, New Zealand, Greenland, Iceland and Central America. He is an ACA Level 3 Coastal Kayak Instructor Trainer and a Level 4 instructor.**

Rick Leader **- is retired from a thirty-year career as executive director of a number of Maryland conservation organizations. He is an UnCon graduate who also has done expeditions in the Florida Keys, Green River of Utah, Doruo River in Portugal and Baja.**

Tom Noffsinger **- has been involved in water sports his entire life, beginning with canoeing, surfing and windsurfing, before discovering sea kayaking. He is an ACA Advanced Open Water Instructor (L-5) and has been teaching for nearly 20 years, with an emphasis on surf zones and rough water paddling.**

Scott Ramsey Ph.D. **– is a professor at Prescott College and runs the Alaska Outdoor Science School in Haines, AK.**

Rick Wiebush **– runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. Rick has been paddling for 25 years, and is an ACA L3 IT and British Canoeing 4* Sea Leader.**

Karen Wilson **- completed the UnCon 1 series in 2023 to prepare for the Key Largo to Key West trip. She will continue to improve her skills in the UnCon 2 series this summer. She says that the biggest surprise when she started kayaking was the wonderful, supportive community of paddlers that participate in the sport.**

Coastbusters **welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and "how-to" articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and sea kayaking-related photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers. It just so happens that some of this month's contributors are instructors. That is not a requirement. Articles should be limited to about 1,000 – 1,500 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.**