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Local Nonprofit Sends Research Teams to Alaska

WILMINGTON, NC-August 15, 2022-From May 29th through June 10th, two research teams from Plastic Ocean Project visited Alaska's Katmai National Park. Hosted by the Kodiak, AK-based Ocean Plastics Recovery Project, their objectives were to take marine surface samples from the Shelikof Strait, remove plastic and other debris, collect and analyze samples of grizzly bear scat and collaborate with other research professionals. For each of the two sessions, they joined other researchers and volunteers to form two groups of twelve ranging in age from seventeen to seventy-seven.

Situated in King Salmon, Alaska, Katmai National Park lies about 290 miles southwest of Anchorage and is only accessible by boat or plane. The park covers over four million pristine acres and is known for its healthy population of grizzly bears, rugged coastline, salmon-filled waters and significant number of volcanoes, seven of which are active.

POP's team included three staff members, one volunteer, a recent high school grad and POP's PhD intern from the Czech Republic. All were in agreement that their time in the "The Last Frontier" was life changing.

In between collecting samples and removing debris, the group experienced many "firsts." From seaplane travel to living onboard a research vessel, taking dips in the chilly Pacific, seeing grizzlies in the wild and whale spotting in the vast expanses between the fjords and glaciers along the Shelikof Strait, it was quite an adventure. The trip also coincided with the phenomenon of Alaska's "Midnight Sun."

Removing the beach debris proved daunting and physically challenging due to the sheer volume, which included polystyrene foam, plastic trash, rope and fishing nets. The two groups recovered 20,000 pounds of trash in less than 2 weeks. Due to wind patterns and water currents, an amazing amount of debris ends up on Alaska's beaches. Peter Murphy of NOAA has noted "You see beaches that you think should be pristine in remote locations and instead, they have a lot of debris. This is a big problem and we can all take a part in fixing it."

A recurring sentiment among the group was that at times it was truly overwhelming to witness the large amounts of debris and realize they'd never be able to get it all. The youngest team member, Eleanor Meinhold, who will be a freshman at NC State this fall, reflected, "I knew the work we did mattered to

the ecosystem we were in and I truly believe that doing something is better than doing nothing-always.”

This was a follow-up to a trip made by POP’s director, Bonnie Monteleone, in June of 2021. Hosted by the Kodiak, AK-based Ocean Plastics Recovery Project, Monteleone worked with Stina Inc., a firm that analyzes recycled content in their quest to discover solutions to the issues caused by climate change and plastic pollution. During her visit, Monteleone had an epiphany that in addition to examining plastics’ impact on marine mammals, Alaska was the perfect place to also study how terrestrial mammals are affected.

For this year’s trip, the neighborhood grizzlies were happy to oblige and provided twelve scat samples for scientific analysis.

Getting out of the lab and into the field was inspiring for University of Georgia grad, Cydney Wang, who reflected that the trip renewed her passion for the research she wants to do in the future. POP’s Lab Director, Kayla West summed it up this way: “The research we do is important to show policymakers, businesses and the general public how to enact change. If I can change the plastic habits of one person, myself included, I’m doing something worthwhile.”

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