

Campers enjoy an open beach on Aialik Bay.

Fireweed thrives along streambeds and on other disturbed ground.

Joseph R. Pearce/DRK Photo

Exit Glacier, near Seward, can be reached by road and hiking trail.

Rugged, rocky, and often steep coasts characterize Kenai Fjords.

Bald eagles both hunt and scavenge, reaping bounties of land and of sea.

Harbor seals ride ice floes in McCarty Fjord.

Stephen J. Kraseman/DRK Photo

Dwarf dogwood (bunchberry), a diminutive herb, grows in moist woodlands.

Colorful horned puffins frequent steep cliffs and rocky ledges on the outer coast and at the mouths

of fjords. Puffins abound on offshore islands.

David Wm. Miller

Glacier-carved Valleys Filled with Ocean Waters

Background photo: Harding Icefield

The Kenai Fjords are coastal mountain fjords whose placid seascapes reflect scenic icebound landscapes and whose salt spray mixes with mountain mist. Located on the southeastern Kenai Peninsula, the national park is a pristine and rugged land supporting many unaltered natural environments and ecosystems. The land boasts an icefield wilderness, unnamed waterfalls in unnamed canyons, glaciers that sweep down narrow mountain valleys, and a coastline along which thousands of seabirds and marine mammals raise their young each year.

Kenai Fjords National Park derives its name from the long, steep-sided, glacier-carved valleys that are now filled with ocean waters. The seaward ends of the Kenai Mountains are slipping into the sea, being dragged under by the collision of two tectonic plates of the Earth's crust. What were once alpine valleys filled with glacier ice are now deepwater mountain-flanked fjords. The forces that caused this land to submerge are still present. In 1964, the Alaskan Good Friday earthquake dropped the shoreline another 1.8 meters (6 feet) in just one day. As the land sinks into the ocean, glacier-carved cirques are turned into half-

moon bays and mountain peaks are reduced to wave-beaten islands and stacks.

Though the land is subsiding, a mountain platform 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) high still comprises the coast's backdrop. The mountains are mantled by the 780-square-kilometer (300-square-mile) Harding Icefield, the park's dominant feature. The icefield was not discovered until early this century when a mapping team realized that several coastal glaciers belonged to the same massive system. Today's icefield measures some 55 kilometers long by 35 kilometers wide (35 by 20 miles). Only isolated mountain peaks interrupt its nearly flat, snowclad surface. These protruding nunataks—this Eskimo word means "lonely peaks"—rise dramatically from the frozen clutches of the Ice Age.

The mountains intercept moisture-laden clouds, which replenish the icefield with 10-20 meters (35-65 feet) of snow annually. Time and the weight of overlying snow transform the snow into ice. The pull of gravity and the weight of the snowy overburden make the ice flow out in all

directions. It is squeezed into glaciers that creep downward like giant bulldozers, carving and gouging the landscape. Along the coast eight glaciers reach the sea, and these tidewater glaciers calve icebergs into the fjords. The thunderous boom of calving ice can sometimes be heard some 30 kilometers (20 miles) away.

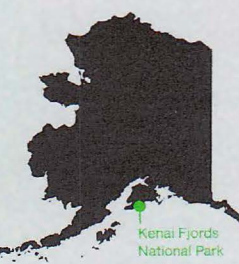
The park's wildlife is as varied as its landscape. Mountain goats, moose, bears, wolverines, marmots, and other land mammals have re-established themselves on a thin life zone between marine waters and the icefield's frozen edges. Bald eagles nest in the tops of spruce and hemlock trees. A summer burgeoning of life occurs in the fjords. Steller sea lions haul out on rocky islands at the entrances to Aialik and Nuka Bays. Harbor seals ride the icebergs. Dall porpoises, sea otters, and gray, humpback, killer, and minke whales ply the fjord waters. Halibut, ling cod, and black bass lurk deep in these waters, through which salmon return for inland spawning runs. Thousands of seabirds, including horned and tufted puffins, black-legged kittiwakes, common murre, and the ubiquitous gulls, seasonally inhabit steep cliffs and rocky shores.

Exit Glacier, remnant of a larger glacier once extending to Resurrection Bay, is one of several rivers of ice flowing off the icefield. Active, yet retreating, it provides the perfect setting to explore. Here are found newly exposed, scoured, and polished bedrock and a regime of plant succession from earliest pioneer plants to mature forest of Sitka spruce and western hemlock.

Humans have had little lasting impact on this environment, although the park includes a few Native American archeological sites and isolated gold extraction locations. The park's overwhelming significance is as a living laboratory of change. Plants and wildlife subsist here amidst dynamic interactions of water, ice, and a glacier-carved landscape relentlessly pulled down by the Earth's crustal movements. The Harriman Expedition, a steamship-borne venture visiting the fjords in 1899, predicted this area's future value as a scenic tourist attraction. To protect this life and landscape, a national monument was proclaimed in 1978, and the 235,000-hectare (580,000-acre) Kenai Fjords National Park was established in 1980.

Logistics

The park lies south and west of Seward and 210 kilometers (130 miles) south of Anchorage via the Seward Highway. Bus and commuter flight services connect Seward and Anchorage. The Alaska Marine Highway (ferry) connects Seward with Homer and Seldovia



reached by air or trail. Air and boat charters provide access to the fjords.

Accommodations. There are no overnight accommodations or food services in the park. A walk-in campground is at Exit Glacier. Two public use cabins, at Aialik Bay and Placer Creek, are available for overnight recreational use by reservation.

Get cabin permits at the visitor center in Seward. Seward provides full tourist accommodations, including campgrounds.

Services. Summer boat charters are available from Seward; air charters from Seward or Homer.

Authorized commercial guides provide camping, fishing, and kayaking guide services. Write to the park address for a list.

For Information

The visitor center offers a photo exhibit, slide programs, maps, natural history publications, and information services. It is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and weekdays the rest of the year. Park rangers provide information at Exit Glacier daily in summer. The ranger station there has exhibits on the glacier and Harding Icefield. Activities include naturalist-led hikes to the glacier's base. Saturday evening campfire programs, and all-day hikes to the icefield.

For more information. For information about the park write to: Superintendent, P.O. Box 1727, Seward, AK 99664. Maps and other publications are sold by the nonprofit

Alaska Natural History Association at the same address. Information on the Seward area is available from the Seward Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 756, Seward, AK 99664.

What to See and Do

Exit Glacier is the most accessible park area. A gravel road at mile 3.7 of the Seward Highway leads 14.5 kilometers (9 miles) to the Exit Glacier Ranger Station. A 2-kilometer (1.3-mile) trail with wayside exhibits begins there. It provides handicapped access to within 400 meters (¼ mile) of the glacier. A trail across moraines and bedrock continues to the terminus. Exit Glacier descends 760 meters (2,500 feet) over its nearly 5-kilometer (3-mile) length. A rough-cut 5-kilometer (3-mile) route follows the glacier's flank up to the icefield. Winter travel to the glacier is by ski, snowmachine, dog team, or snowshoe. (See For Information for other activities.)

Scenic one-hour flights give views of the vast Harding Icefield. Landings can be arranged for day-skiing or expeditions. Charters also offer the coast for flightseeing and access to the fjords for extended kayak trips. Scheduled daily boat charters in summer ply the coast for observing calving glaciers, seabirds, and marine mammals. Boat charters are available for overnight trips to the fjords and for fishing trips in Resurrection Bay. Saltwater fish include halibut, lingcod, and a variety of rockfish; freshwater fish include Dolly Varden and silver, red, chum, and pink salmon. (Also see Backcountry Travel.)

Weather and Clothing

Overcast and/or cool days are the norm for summer in this maritime climate of abundant rain. Sunny, warm summer days are the welcome exception. May is the driest month; successive months see increasing precipitation. By mid-June daytime temperatures reach 12-20°C (mid-50s to mid-60s F). September initiates the wet and stormy fall.

Wool clothing and sturdy rain gear—pants, coat and rain hat—are essential. Good walking shoes or boots are needed for hiking at Exit Glacier.

Backcountry Travel

This rugged wilderness requires good physical condition, proper equipment, and reasonable precautions. If you plan a backcountry trip without a guide, you should get current specific local information from the park staff before you set out. To challenge the Harding Icefield, you must be prepared to face sudden storms, high winds, blinding sunlight, and extreme temperature changes, even on an otherwise quiet summer ski trip. Winter travelers to Exit Glacier may face deep snow and cold temperatures. Know the symptoms of hypothermia and their treatment.

Bears. Black bears and brown/grizzly bears should always be consid-

ered dangerous. Keep food supplies separate from your campsite and equipment. Make noise when hiking, so you don't startle bears. Feeding any wildlife is unsafe and sets up behavior patterns that may endanger future travelers.

Boating Safety

Know your boat and its operation. All federal and state boating regulations apply. Carry signal equipment and a personal survival kit that includes temporary shelter, warm clothing, and extra food. If you enter the fjords without a guide, check at the Seward visitor center for landing sites, mooring areas, weather conditions, and navigational hazards. A seaworthy craft and rough-water boating experience are absolutely required. File a float plan with a responsible person.

Map Warning

The map in this folder is not recommended for backpacking or navigational purposes. Do not try to navigate without nautical charts and tide tables. Topographic maps and area information are available at the visitor center.

Kenai Fjords

Kenai Fjords National Park
Alaska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

