



## Prince William Sound Science Center, the Formative Years - 1989-1994

Prior to 1989, conversations in Prince William Sound between fishermen, resource managers, researchers, community members and the University of Alaska Marine Advisory Program often referred to frustration over the lack of local capacity to house and retain research. Teams of scientists often

descended on the area to poke, peek, and ponder, but typically left without sharing what they had learned.

Starting in late 1987, Rick Steiner, marine advisory agent at the Cordova Alaska Sea Grant office, sponsored an "almost every Wednesday" bag lunch as a forum to brainstorm strategies for starting a research center. James Brady of the Department of Fish and Game, Riki Ott, fisherman and marine toxicologist, Ken Hill, fisherman and veterinarian, Chuck Monnett and Lisa Rotterman, sea otter research biologists, Kate Wynne, marine mammal biologist, Bruce Suzumoto of Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation, City Manager Don Moore, fisherman and city council member RJ Kopchak, and others met over the next year. During the same time, the U.S. Forest Service contemplated starting a "Copper River Delta Institute" to focus research on the river delta system. Steiner and Kopchak drafted a business plan for a research support station based on these early talks.

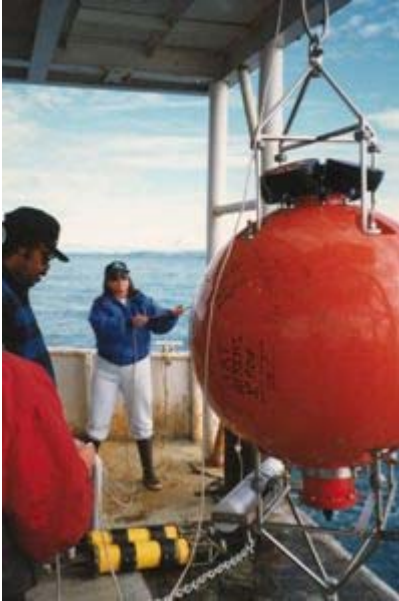
The geographical area of interest was "the drainages of Prince William Sound and the Copper River, and the associated waters between Cape Suckling and Cape Cleare." This included well over 2,700 miles of coastline, a million acres of wetlands, and a thousand miles of river, adding up to almost 30 million acres of land and water. This area was interdependent, surrounded by the tallest coastal mountain range in the world, including two giant bowls of biodiversity that converged at the fishing village of Cordova.

The Prince William Sound Science Center (PWSSC) was originally envisioned as a membership institute, modeled after the Organization for Tropical Studies, with various universities paying for the use of facilities and support services. This would allow the local center to capture data generated by ongoing and proposed research, and to provide access to and interpretation of that information to regional resource users.

Establishment of the center was accelerated in late March of 1989 when the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* went aground. Paperwork for the institute was in "rough draft" form. Within days, the articles of incorporation were filed and an abandoned icehouse secured to accommodate the institute. Over the next few months the City of Cordova loaned the fledgling research facility \$100,000 for start up costs. Chuck Monnett, Ph.D. joined Kopchak, Suzumoto, Ott, and Moore on the board of founding directors. At the same time Kopchak, working with the City of Cordova, established the Oil Spill Response Office to coordinate community efforts. The city then hired Mead Treadwell to head up the local oil spill response action. Treadwell would play a major role both in developing the city's spill response strategies and in creating the Oil Spill Recovery Institute (OSRI).

By May of 1989, Penny Oswald and biologist Mimi Oliver were on staff at the new science center, soon followed by Nancy Bird. Fundraising, building renovation, and support for science planning filled their days and nights. Kopchak became the paid president for several months after a grant was received from Conservation International. Governor Steve Cowper offered state support through a \$250,000 building renovation grant; years later he also served briefly on the OSRI Advisory Board. Spencer Beebe of Ecotrust, an

early PWSSC mentor, joined the Science Center board and provided introductions to private foundations and encouragement that resulted in several early grant awards. Treadwell, Rotterman, and Steiner, along with Pete Mickelson, Ph.D. ornithologist, joined the board of PWSSC later in the summer of 1989.



By July of 1989, John P. Harville, Ph.D. had joined the effort as mentor and Founding Director. Dr. Harville had recently retired as Executive Director of the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, and had been founding director of both the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories on Monterey Bay, and the National Coastal Resources Research and Development Institute at Newport, Oregon. While Harville worked on institutional relationships and science plans, other board members worked on ways to raise funds to keep the fledgling center growing and effective. Treadwell believed that long term institutional funding was possible through federal legislation. He drafted language for the Oil Spill Recovery Institute, which Senator Ted Stevens included in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990.

It was challenging to obtain research grants in the early years, and equally difficult to establish scientific credibility without the research grants. In 1990, Monnett and Rotterman moved their U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service research grant for surveys of sea otters to the Science Center. That work, combined with several private foundation awards supporting research planning workshops comprised the Center's initial programs.

In March of 1990, Harville served as moderator for a regional research planning conference. Over 115 invited participants representing researchers, resource managers, commercial fishing interests, and agencies identified and prioritized research topics. The highest priority was given to monitoring, modeling and mitigating the long-term impacts of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. A regional science planning team evolved. Known as "Prince William Sound Fisheries Ecosystem Research Planning Group" (PWSFERPG), the team developed an approach that would evolve into the "SEA" program, the Sound Ecosystem Assessment. Commercial fishing interests were finally well-represented within this planning team of researchers, educators and officials. PWSSC was in the center of these regional efforts, and has remained an active leader since.

In October of 1990, Gary Thomas, Ph.D. was named Science Center President. July of 1991 saw the publication of *Prince William Sound, Copper River, and North Gulf of Alaska Ecosystem*. Conceived by Spencer Beebe of Ecotrust, and sponsored by PWSSC, Conservation International, and the U.S. Forest Service Copper River Delta Institute, this study and series of photos and maps initiated the effort to look at the entire region as an interconnected system. The document was the first step in laying out a data-rich, spatially explicit landscape approach to understanding the complexities of the region.

The Board and staff of the Science Center continued to work towards an "ecosystem approach" to research, but funding and support merely trickled in. Finally, after two years of pink salmon and herring fishery failures in Prince William Sound, fishermen and women lined up their boats to block the entrance to the Port Valdez oil terminal, expressing their frustration at the lack of effort and funds expended to research the oil spill's continued affect on the region. Soon after, the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill (EVOS) Trustee Council backed research that would consider the impact of the spill using an ecosystem approach.

