Wildness: Remote, Dynamic, and Intact

And so we arrive in Glacier Bay, a land reborn, a world returning to life, a living lesson in resilience. If ever we needed a place to intrigue and inspire us, this is it. Glacier Bay is a homeland, a natural lab, a wilderness, a national park, a United Nations biosphere reserve and a world heritage site. Not a bad resume for a young land, a new sea. Just 250 years ago, Glacier Bay was all glacier and ice: a massive river of ice, roughly a hundred miles long and thousands of feet deep, occupied the entire bay. Today, that glacier is gone, having retreated north. Fewer than a dozen small tidewater glaciers remain. Impressive in themselves, sequestered at the heads of their inlets in the upper bay, they flow from the coastal mountains to the sea, and calve great shards of ice that become cold warriors with diamond-like edges. They are witnesses to change, those rivers of ice. They invite us to slow down and breathe deeply of the cool ice-age air, and to imagine, if only for a day, the way things used to be.

A journey through Glacier Bay is more than a journey through geography, it's a journey through time. We begin in the modern age and finish in the ice age, traveling north from the forested lower bay to the rocky, icy upper bay (roughly 65 miles). We pass through hundreds of bold changes and subtle transitions where modern age air, and to imagine, if only for a day, the way things used to be.

Connections with the Land

A moose swims an inlet. A seedling spruce emerges from granite, reaching for the sky. Life is tough and tenacious here. No wonder Glacier Bay holds powerful stories and attracts scientists, preservationists, and travelers from around the world. One of those scientists was a plant ecologist from Minnesota, a quiet man with an easy smile who studied relationships. He came to Glacier Bay in 1916, and over several decades returned many times to make careful observations. His name was William S. Cooper. What he found inspired him—a wild land, unfiltered, untamed, returning to life in the wake of glacial recession—that he shared in the Ecological Society of America. Might it be possible, then, to preserve Glacier Bay? To keep it intact? In ways that will teach and enlighten us? Cooper knew the history of Glacier Bay. Tlingit people had occupied the area for countless generations, living in the shadows of glaciers, prospering from the bounty of the land and sea. Captain George Vancouver had sailed the area in 1794, and created a rough map that showed the bay filled with a single great glacier. Eighty-five years after Vancouver, naturalist/preservationist John Muir had visited the bay by canoe, and found the glacier receding as fast as a mile per year. Muir wrote about Glacier Bay with such lyrical heart—his words like music—that he changed America's national perception of Alaska from one of daunting cold to enchanting beauty.

Like the little plants he studied, William S. Cooper was tough and tenacious. Like John Muir, he found in Glacier Bay a power that inspired him to become a fighter. It paid off in 1925 when Glacier Bay became a national monument. Fifty-five years later, President Jimmy Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act that created Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. It would have made William Cooper smile and John Muir sing.

Haa aani a ya
This is our homeland...
Glaciers Advance, Glaciers Retreat

Until 10,000 years ago, continental-scale ice sheets came and went many times for seven million years. During this Great Ice Age these ice sheets would reach as far south as the upper Midwest of the United States.

Glacier Bay today is the product of the Little Ice Age, a geologically recent glacial advance in northern regions. The Little Ice Age reached its maximum extent about 1750.

Some glaciers are retreating here, others are advancing. In the contiguous United States where glaciers may soon be a thing of the past.

At Glacier Bay you can witness geological processes and change usually hardly noticed in the span of a human life. Compare this diagram with the 1680 Huna Tlingit scene on the other side. There was no Glacier Bay then, only a broad valley with a glacier moving down it.

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