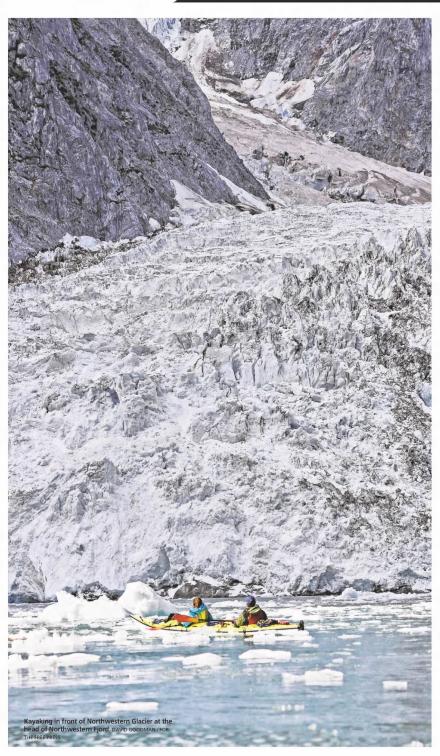


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COVER STORY



Alaska as we know it today will not be the same in 50 years. Alaska is on the front line of climate change, with the titanic forces of sky, water and earth colliding in dramatic fashion.



DAVID GOODMAN

ur sea kayaks drift slowly toward the imposing face of the glacier. Suddenly, our gaze is broken by what sounds like a rifle shot. My head snaps sideways to where my daughter and nephew are gently bobbing in their double kayak. Just then, I see a house-sized block of ice calve off the face of the glacier and vanish beneath the inky black water.

A large swell rolls towards us.

I instinctively dig my paddle into the water to brace the boat; it is not an option to take an unplanned swim among the icebergs. Our boat rises and falls harmlessly as the wave rolls past. I exhale.

Alaska promised drama. Grandeur. Beauty. Tranquility. Thrills. It was delivering — sometimes a little too close for comfort.

"The last frontier," as the Alaska license plate proclaims, had somehow solved my in the years, that I have followed.

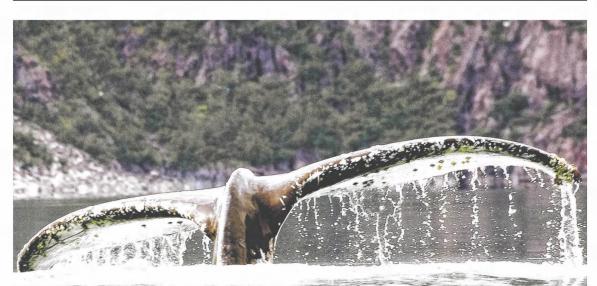
"The last frontier," as the Alaska license plate proclaims, had somehow eluded me in the years that I have followed my passion for exploring wilderness on foot, boat and skis. But suddenly this bucket-list trip felt urgent.

The reason is simple: climate change. Sure, I've always wanted to go to Alaska for an epic adventure. But I also was motivated to go because Alaska as we know it today will not be the same in 50 years. Alaska is on the front line of climate change, with the titanic forces of sky, water and earth colliding in dramatic fashion.

Everything about Alaska is larger









A humpback whale dives in Northwestern Fjord, Alaska. DAVID GOODMAN / FOR THE FREE PRE

than life. The 49th state is twice the size of Texas and one-fifth the size of the rest of the United States. Its 6,640-mile

coastline is half again longer than the East and West coasts of the United States combined.

The impact of the changing climate similarly has taken place on an extraordinary scale. Glacial retreat is one of the world's most visible indicators of climate change.

place of an extraordinary scale. Glaciar Fetreat is one of the world's most visible indicators of climate change. Alaska has more than 100,000 glaciers covering 5 percent of the state—and a staggering 99 percent of these glaciers are receding. Some 40 cubic miles of ice might be melting annually in Alaska, and the state's vanishing glaciers are responsible for 8 percent of the rise in global sea levels—just in the past decade.

Climate change is largely a manmade disaster. Yet in spite of overwhelming scientific evidence of manmade warming—and this summer's record-breaking heat waves, droughts and wildfires—the fossil-fuel industry and its allies in Congress have succeeded in sowing doubt and blocking meaningful efforts to curb global warming. In the next few months, barring intervention from President Obama, Shell Oil is expected to begin the first offshore drilling operation in the Arctic Ocean in Alaska's Beaufort and Chukch is eas, one of the most extreme environments on the planet. The renewed threat of oil spills, combined with the impact of warming, has turned Alaska intopossibly the most contested and threatened landscape into possibly the most contested and threatened landscape

So last summer, I ventured to the top of North America with my wife, Sue, our 19-year-old daughter, Ariel, our son,

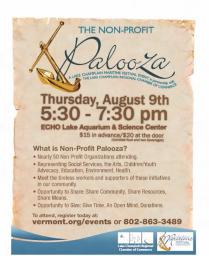
Jasper, 11, and nephew Thomas, a 25-year-old marine scientist recently out of grad school. We wanted to experience Alaska and its endangered glaciers as intimately as we could: We chose to travel in sea kayaks deep into Kenai Fjords National Park, home to the Harding Icefield, the 700-square-mile expanse of ice that covers the southern portion of Alaska's Kenai

The Harding is the largest icefield in the U.S. But as we saw from our kayaks, it is shrinking by the day.

Our trip begins in the fishing town of Seward, Alaska, a two-hour drive southeast of Anchorage on the tip of the Kenai Peninsula. There we meet up with guides Kayti Rowen and Brian Studiali of Sunny Cove Sea Kayaking (www.sunnycove.com). Kayti and Brian, an energetic and knowledgeable pair, orient us to what lies ahead. We will sea kayak for five days in Northwestern Fjord, a unique and remote landscape where five glaciers pour off the Harding Icefield, and three tidewater glaciers tumble directly into the sea.

"Northwestern is probably the most pristine place I've ever been," says an excited Kayti, a tall, effusive woman with an easy smile. "It makes me feel really small."

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COVER STORY



Kayaking in front of Ogive Glacier, one of three tidewater glaciers at the head of Northwestern Fjord. DAVID GOODMAN / FOR

The boundaries between man and nature, between modern and primitive, between environmental policy and reality, all vanish here in the Alaskan wilderness. As politicians equivocate, and fossil-fuel companies obfuscate, this icy wilderness simply disappears.

Continued from Page 5C

At 5 a.m., we are driving on a rough road chipped into the side of a cliff. About 15 minutes outside of Seward, the road vanishes into the water. This is land's end, Alas-

A steel skiff awaits us just off shore. We change our mode of transport and load four sea kayaks and a week's worth of food and camping gear onto the boat. Chance Miller, the raffishly handsome 27-year-old skipper, backs the skiff out into blustery Resurrection Bay and begins the several-hour journey to Northwestern Fjord. As we motor out into the Gulf of Alaska, he motions with a

As we motor out into the Gulf of Alaska, he motions with a sweep of his hand to the vast body of water around us. "Welcome to the largest expanse of wilderness on Earth," he says. "The next landfall is Antarctica."

This waterscape teems with life. Our boat passes an island crawling with thousands of barking Steller sea lions. Birds circle overhead crowing hysterically, and puffins peer out quizzically from their rocky perches. Miller casts his deep-sea fishing rod overboard and lands several 10-pound fish in quick succession, as easily as if reaching into a fish bow! ing into a fish bowl.

After several hours, our boat makes a broad turn and slows down. A deep fjord hemmed in by towering rock walls and glaciers opens before us. We have arrived in

Northwestern Fjord (also known as Northwestern Lagoon). Miller glances at a GPS but does not pay it much heed.

"Ten or 20 years ago, we had no charting at all of these "Ten or 20 years ago, we had no charting at all of these areas. It was just local knowledge where to slow down," he explains as he maneuvers the boat around unseen underwater hazards. "Even now, it's charted but not well. This is still a raw pioneer-type place. When you look at pictures, you realize how much it has changed."

Once ice, now sea

The pace of change in Northwestern Fjord has been breathtaking. Since being named on a 1909 expedition by Northwestern University geologist Ulysses S. Grant (no relation to the 18th U.S. president), the glacier that covered the fjord has retreated more than six miles.

Indeed, everywhere we will be paddling for the next five days was covered in ice less than a century ago. Scientists note this is evidence the climate has been warming since the last Ice Age—but the pace of change has accelerated dramatically in recent years due to human

The loss of glaciers has serious implications for the global climate. Glaciers regulate regional surface temperatures. Even slight changes in surface temperatures



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in Alaska contribute to powerful global atmospheric changes that have never been experienced before. When glaciers melt, sea levels rise, threatening to displace millions of coastal residents or most at the result.

dents around the world.

The rapid changes in the land lead Chance Miller, whose family has been running a water tax it of these remote fjords for decades, to question what will happen to Alaska, and to his way

family has been running a water taxi to these remote fjords for decades, to question what will happen to Alaska, and to his way of life.

"I wonder, 'Is it a viable thing to keep taking people to these places? Are they going to be around that much longer? Will people want to come here?" Miller says.

He peers out at the fjord's stunning hues of green, white and gray and concludes, "The answer is basically yes. ... It is a beautiful place, and it always will be."

Miller finally pulls up onto a rocky beach, unloads my family and our multicolored mountain of gear, makes arrangements for a pickup in five days, and bids us farewell. The sound of the boat's motor fades and instantly is replaced by the shriek of a bald eagle circling overhead. I look along the beach and see a large bear scampering away.

We are alone in a landscape of mythical scale. Waterfalls tumble 700 feet down a cliff face, the height so great that the water simply vaporizes before hitting the ground. Massive glaciers at the far-off head of the fjord twist and split like a slithering snake, then plunge dramatically into the sea. It evokes images of Harry Potter — of magical creatures soaring and darting about and the intoxicating sense that danger lurks just out of sight.

For 11-year-old Jasper, the best magic in this place is happening at the end of his fishing rod. Within an hour of our arrival, he reels in a 12-inch cod, which quickly becomes a dinner appetizer. Sensing a kindred spirit and an opportunity, our guide Brian, a Florida native and avid angler, politely asks if he can borrow my rod and share a kayak with Jasper for the next few days. From that moment on, their kayak is transformed into a fishing boat with a line permanently in the water.

Meanwhile, my nephew Thomas, flush with knowledge

into a fishing boat with a line permanently in the water.

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