

2020 slide show <https://photos.app.goo.gl/4af37K1QUKoyPcd49>

Hello, my name is Kathy Sarns and I'm president of the Friends of Kachemak Bay State Parks. I'll refer to us as 'The Friends' during this talk. We are a non-profit volunteer organization that promotes the enhancement, preservation and protection of the natural recreational, scientific and historical resources of Kachemak Bay State Parks which is located on the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula near Homer. Most of this Park is only accessible by boat or aircraft. If you've never been down here it is a world class recreational & wilderness area of over 400,000 acres of spectacular mountains, glaciers, forests, beaches, and rivers with views that will knock your socks off. We have 10 volunteer board members including myself and all our funding comes from local donations & grants.

This will be only our second season of organizing a volunteer trail clearing program under the umbrella of the Friends, so we are still figuring this out as we go. There's about 84 miles of trails in the Park across the Bay and in 2018 only about 10 miles of those trails were cleared & hike-able and some trails were disappearing back into nature. Today there's about 20 miles of cleared trails over there, thanks to volunteer efforts. We have some trails on this side of the Bay, thanks to the Homer Bike Club working with State park to create & maintain the Diamond Creek trails. Friends also raised funds for, submitted and are now waiting for an ILMA to be approved for public land access from East End road for a future trail system on State Park land called Cottonwood /Eastland.

I first began volunteering in 2016 for Kachemak Bay State Park when some of my favorite trails across the bay were no longer hike-able. I was able to get trained to use a gas brush cutter and later a chainsaw thru the State Park at that time. When I began volunteering for the Park in 2016, after I was safety approved, it would just be me and a friend or 2 & State Parks would drop us off across the Bay and I'd use the gas brusher for clearing brush and friends would rake and throw & lop behind me. Then eventually another friend would ask to get trained on a brusher too and then we'd have 2 teams leap frogging down the trail getting twice as much done. After posting our volunteer trail work on social media, we soon had a long list of folks that wanted to help out. At that time all volunteers would sign the State Park waiver and they could help either the Park Ranger or Park Specialist or small projects like mine approved by the Park. Back then State Park would most often provide rides to volunteers on the Park boat.

Then in the last few years due to State liability changes and limited personnel it has gotten more difficult for volunteers to use State Park power tools or to be trained by the Park or be transported by Park boats. And the brush has been growing in faster than the limited State Park volunteers & personal could keep up with.

I joined the Friends Board in 2019 and in early 2020 we acquired liability insurance and purchased our own power tools and got a trailer to store them in. Last year 2020 was our first season of having volunteers work under Friends with a Special use permit with the State Park. We put in over 2300 volunteer hours with a covid mitigation plan and numerous small groups all working outside. We provided a chainsaw class for volunteers and we had a safety class on brush-cutting. We plan to have another chainsaw class and refresher on the brush cutters as well as other training like a Wilderness First aid & CPR class this spring. At this time we have about 6 power tool trained & approved volunteers that can be leaders of small groups of volunteers and we hope to have more leaders after the trainings this spring.

To help avoid confusion about the 2 separate waivers now: one for Friends and one for the State Park, one of our clever board members, Dana consolidated both the State Park Waiver and the Friends Waiver into one packet so when you ask to sign up for 2021, you get ONE packet and sign all waivers and send it in and then you are on the volunteer email list for both the State Park projects and for Friends projects. You can find the link to this volunteer packet on our FB and Instagram and website FriendsofKachemakBay.org

From the beginning, we've always made sure that our trail clearing plans were approved by the Park ranger and trails specialist. And now when we do work thru the Friends we make sure we are on the same page with the Park, & that our priorities are aligned and we're not duplicating efforts. Right now Friends is working on a new agreement (either MOU or special use permit) with State Park. Its been crucial to keep up good communication with the Park Rangers and Trails Specialist so we can support the State Park & our mission.

Besides clearing trails Friends volunteers also make improvements at campgrounds and cabins and as well as replacing the Park signage this year which has become outdated and eaten by bears. Our Water trail committee is always working on the beautiful beach camp sites around the Bay adding bear boxes, outhouses and other improvements. We have created the Grace Ridge Run, a trail run that is a fund raiser for Friends and a way for new people to see this amazing Park. My dream is that we get enough trails cleared that we can move the location of the race to different trails around the Park on alternate years. (FB: Kachemak Bay Mountain Classic.)

Another dream I have is that Friends somehow establishes a 'trails in perpetuity funding source' to pay a small seasonal crew to keep basic maintenance up each summer in the Park to ensure the trails stay open and then volunteers would fill in

where needed. We have no idea how to do this yet, but again we had no idea 2 years ago how to do what we are doing now with our volunteer program.

In Homer much of the economy relies on the trails being hike-able in Kachemak Bay State Park. B&Bs, gift shops, water taxis, guiding services etc all need the Park to have trails where locals and visitors don't get lost. Anyone that volunteers to clear trails here is a hero and the whole community gets involved. If folks can't work on trails, stores donate supplies and water taxis & helicopters donate rides to volunteers, and people donate money to The Friends. Social Media has been a great tool to get people excited about volunteering. We post fun trail work photos including jumping in the ocean afterwards as well as great 'before & after' shots of unhike-able vs hike-able trails and the response is phenomenal. We often add a donate button to these posts and remind folks where they can sign up to volunteer. The Otter Cove Resort offered free rides and free lodging to volunteers to work on the Sadie Knob trail that had completely grown in. This trail had been written off by the Park, since they were too busy with other things. Then last summer Maritime Helicopters donated a helicopter ride so volunteers could finish clearing a crucial part of the trail near the top. At the end of last season the entire Sadie Knob trail is now hike-able thanks to volunteers and support from the community. Both hikers and hunters use this trail.

It takes a village to keep trails open these days and the community of Homer has stepped up and rallied around the Friends to ensure the world class trails of Kachemak Bay are preserved for park users now and for generations to come.

friendsofkachemakbay.org

kbsptrails@gmail.com

info@friendsofkachemakbay.org