



# FY25 ANNUAL REPORT

Pride of Place



# MISSION:

Our mission is to honor the living heritage of the Turnagain Arm and Eastern Kenai Peninsula by connecting people to its lands, stories, and communities.

# VISION:

Our vision is a place of belonging and shared responsibility.

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# LETTER FROM **THE** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

**Dear Friends, Partners, and Supporters,**

This year tested nonprofits across Alaska in ways many of us have never experienced before. Like many of our peers, our federal appropriations were temporarily canceled, grants were rescinded and later reauthorized, and uncertainty made long-term planning extraordinarily difficult. Much of the year was spent navigating shifting realities while continuing to show up for the communities we serve.

Yet despite those challenges, FY25 became one of the strongest and most transformative years in our organization's history.

Together, we expanded our reach, deepened partnerships, and continued building meaningful connections between people and place across the Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm region. We served more youth, schools, and communities through our outdoor education programs than ever before, while also continuing to grow support from donors, partners, volunteers, and families who make this work possible.

Across every program, event, and partnership, we remained grounded in a simple belief: people are more likely to care for places when they get to experience them firsthand. And this place is worth experiencing.

This year also marked an important moment of organizational reflection and evolution. Following a strategic planning process, we made the intentional decision to pause our historic sub granting program as federal funding uncertainty continued to grow. In its place, we focused on strengthening the long-term sustainability of the organization by continuing to diversify revenue and invest in staff-led programs developed directly in response to expressed community needs. While stewardship of Alaska's only National Heritage Area remains central to our work, this evolution has allowed us to deepen our impact while building a more resilient foundation for the future.

Together with our board and community partners, we also adopted a new mission and vision that better reflect who we are becoming: a place-based organization focused on connecting people to Alaska's lands, stories, and communities while fostering a shared sense of responsibility for the places we call home.

As we move into FY26, we do so with optimism and momentum. We are excited to continue expanding our programs, growing our team and partnerships, and preparing for an exciting new chapter for the organization—including a future rebrand that reflects the broader vision of this work. We also hope to one day reintroduce a small grantmaking program supported through private funding once we have built greater financial sustainability independent of federal appropriations.

None of this work would be possible without the extraordinary community that stands behind it. To our partners, board members, and supporters: thank you for believing in this mission and helping carry it forward during a year that often-demanded resilience, creativity, and trust.

There is much ahead, and we are deeply grateful to have you alongside us for the journey.

**Warmly,  
Rachel Blakeslee**



Executive Director  
Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area

# ECONOMIC IMPACT AND PARTNERSHIPS

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**\$783,873** in revenue raised

**\$506,183** in operating expenses

**\$650,000** leveraged in non-federal match

**65** partner organizations engaged

**25** organizations supported through training and capacity building

**55+** volunteers engaged

**6,145+** volunteer hours contributed

# OUTDOOR EDUCATION IMPACT AT A GLANCE

**1,384** youth served

**133** days of programming

**2,100** total participants engaged

**5** year-round programs

**7** communities reached



# RECREATION ACCESS AND STEWARDSHIP

**16** signs installed across 25 miles of the Iditarod National Historic Trail

**9** miles of historic trails brushed

**3** campsites maintained

**4** volunteer trail events

**125** participants in the Spencer Dash





## OUR WORK IN ACTION

We believe the best way to care about a place is to experience it firsthand. Across all of our work, we create meaningful connections between people, place, and community—helping individuals build lasting relationships with the landscapes around them.

Originally established to steward Alaska's only National Heritage Area, KMTA has grown into a place-based nonprofit serving communities from Anchorage to Seward. Through outdoor education, recreation access, storytelling, and stewardship, we ensure these places are not only accessible, but understood, valued, and cared for. We are proud to share what this work looked like in action in FY25.



## FRESH AIR FRIDAYS

Fresh Air Fridays (FAF) are a kid and staff favorite, built around one simple idea: fresh air and fun. Offered across the KMTA region for elementary-aged kids, the program blends adventure, art, science, outdoor skill-building, and unstructured play.

The magic of Fresh Air Fridays is that it creates space for kids to just be kids. Alaska kids are remarkably hardy and ready to get outside in every kind of weather, and FAF meets them there. These days give kids the freedom to explore, take risks, and build confidence in ways that structured environments often don't allow. Research shows that unstructured outdoor play supports the development of critical problem-solving skills and healthy risk management, which we're all about.

Fresh Air Fridays is also intentionally designed to support families by offering safe, enriching programming on school in-service and early release days

## 2025 Highlight

One September day along Kenai Lake brought wind, rain, and a perfect illustration of what Fresh Air Fridays are all about. Kids embraced the elements—walking logs, building forts, tending a campfire, and wading into the waves. The weather didn't limit the experience. It made it.

Afterward, parents shared that their kids came home buzzing with excitement, especially about the moment they got to put out the campfire using water poured from their soaking wet boots.

## 2025 Impact

**30** Program Days

**105** Hours of Programming

**330** Kids Served

**3** Communities Engaged (Whittier, Seward, and Moose Pass)

“Please never stop doing Fresh Air Fridays! I want to do them forever.”

— 6-year-old participant, Seward



# PATHFINDERS

Pathfinders Camps are summer adventures rooted in the iconic trails of the Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area. Through trail-based exploration, local youth spend their days hiking, building outdoor skills, making art, and taking part in hands-on stewardship—learning about the vibrant people and important landscapes that shape our shared stories.

What sets Pathfinders apart is its focus on stewardship and partnership. Kids don't just spend time outside; they learn directly from the people who care these places. Through our partnerships with local organizations, kids get to connect with field experts and community leaders who care for these places. It's about more than being on the trails. It's a chance to understand, actively care for, and feel connected to the lands and communities that define this region.

**“I fell down a lot, but I got back up. I want to run Mt. Marathon when I’m old enough.”**

**— 7-year-old participant**





## 2025 Highlight

One highlight of the 2025 Pathfinders series was a storytelling-themed Mount Marathon program day in Seward, where movement, place, and local stories came together on the trail. Held just two days before the iconic race, we partnered with local author and mountain runner Sean Ulman for this special program.

After warming up with a run around Two Lakes Park, our group set out on the Mount Marathon Jeep Trail, hiking, exploring off-trail, and pausing along the way to listen as Sean read excerpts from his new book. Inspired by the setting, campers also took turns sharing their own stories. The day ended with a visit from local teen and Mount Marathon Jr. race champion Olive Jordan, who shared her own race stories and answered questions from campers, several of whom were set to be first-time Junior Racers in 2025.

## 2025 Impact

**12** Program Days

**84** Hours of Programming

**144** Kids Served

Kids Who Participated Came from the Communities of: Seward, Moose Pass, and Anchorage



## COASTAL CONNECTIONS

Coastal Connections is a week-long summer program that immerses middle school-aged youth in their local coastal ecosystems. Set within the rich marine environments of Kenai Fjords National Park, Prince William Sound, and the surrounding region, the program blends science, outdoor recreation, art, team-building, and social and emotional learning to create meaningful, place-based experiences.

Throughout the week, kids explore these ecosystems through adventure outings and hands-on activities. They hike along the coast, kayak, paddleboard, and investigate intertidal zones—building outdoor skills while learning about marine ecosystems, local history, culture, and stewardship.

Coastal Connections also includes a teacher training offered in partnership with Alaska SeaGrant and the Ocean Alaska Science and Learning Center. Through this model, teachers participate in a week-long training, help lead the summer program, and then bring what they've learned back into their classrooms—extending the program's impact far beyond a single week.

## 2025 Highlight

New in 2025, we introduced a “Just for Girls” Coastal Connections week in Seward, creating a protected space for girls to build confidence, connection, and a sense of belonging on the coast. Each day, the group was joined by a different inspiring local woman, whose expertise and personal experiences of resilience were woven into the day’s activities.

Highlights from the week included a hike and wildflower abundance survey with local NPS ecologist Sadie Ulman, and a hands-on fly-fishing lesson focused on salmon habitat with Anna Astalos from Trout Unlimited. The week culminated in an all-day kayaking excursion in Kenai Fjords National Park for a truly memorable experience.

And the impact on girls was clear: 94% of campers reported a stronger connection to the local environment, and 100% said they gained a deeper understanding of the community, culture, and history of the area.

## 2025 Impact

**20** Program Days

**153** Hours of Programming

**39** Kids Served

**22** Educators Engaged

**3** Communities Reached: Seward, Moose Pass, Whittier

# SNOWSCHOOL

Winter is the longest season in Alaska—and one of the most powerful classrooms. Our SnowSchool program expands access to outdoor learning during the winter months, connecting students to the wild, wonderful world of snow through place-based learning.

Through full-day field trips and classroom visits, students explore winter ecology and watersheds while building outdoor safety skills and confidence. Using an experiential, inquiry-based teaching model, the program helps students develop a foundational understanding of snow science and hydrology, bringing classroom concepts to life through snowshoeing, exploration, and discovery.

SnowSchool also helps fill a critical gap. While many outdoor programs take place in the summer, this program ensures that students in Alaska have access to meaningful outdoor learning year-round.

As part of the Winter Wildlands Alliance SnowSchool network, we're proud to contribute to a nationwide effort that serves more than 35,000 students across 72 programs each year.

**“I will always remember the fun I had while using the snowshoes!”**

**— 4th Grade Anchorage Student**

**“I will remember that no matter how many times you mess up, keep going. It’s hard for animals to survive too.”**

**— 4th Grade Anchorage Student**



## 2025 Highlight

During a 4th grade SnowSchool field trip at Moose Meadows in Girdwood, one moment captured the deeper impact of outdoor learning. As students worked together to build snow shelters and learn about the insulating properties of snow, one volunteer chaperone—a student’s grandfather—stood out.

He had joined the trip at his granddaughter’s insistence: “Grandpa, you have to come. You know the most about snow, more than anyone.” It didn’t take long before he was pulled into action, helping her team design and build their snow shelter.

Watching the two of them snowshoe and explore together was a powerful reminder that outdoor education extends beyond the students themselves. SnowSchool gives family members a unique opportunity to lean into their student’s world. It creates space not only for learning, but for connection, strengthening relationships across generations.

— Josh Vantrease, Program Coordinator, KMTA

## 2025 Impact

**47** Program Days

**110** Hours of Programming

**644** Kids Served

**13** Educators Engaged

**28** Communities Reached: Seward, Moose Pass, Whittier

**9** Grades Served: K-8

**4** Communities Reached: Seward, Moose Pass, Girdwood, Anchorage



“As a result of Alaska Outdoor School, I will stand up for myself and become a geologist.”

— 5th Grade Anchorage Student

## ALASKA OUTDOOR SCHOOL

Alaska Outdoor School (AOS) is a transformative overnight learning experience for 5th grade students from the Anchorage School District and the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District. Over three days and two nights in Portage, Alaska—at the base of Portage Glacier within the Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area and Chugach National Forest—students step outside the traditional classroom and into an immersive, place-based learning environment.

Through exploration, storytelling, artistic expression, and scientific observation, students engage directly with the natural world—learning outdoor skills, natural and cultural history, and key concepts in ecology, biology, and geology, while also being introduced to potential career pathways.

AOS follows a three-touch model that extends learning beyond the field experience, with a pre- and post-visit at their school, to reinforce key concepts and reflections. At its core, AOS is education through adventure. By connecting students with the wonder of the outdoors, even simple moments—like skipping a rock on Portage Lake—become powerful, lasting experiences. Students leave with new knowledge, stronger connections to their peers, and a deeper appreciation for Alaska’s public lands and natural resources.

## 2025 Impact

**30** Program Days

**300** Hours of Programming

**200** Students Served

**55** Teachers, School Staff, and Chaperones Engaged

**8** Schools Served

**4** Communities Reached: Seward, Moose Pass, Anchorage, Kenai Peninsula

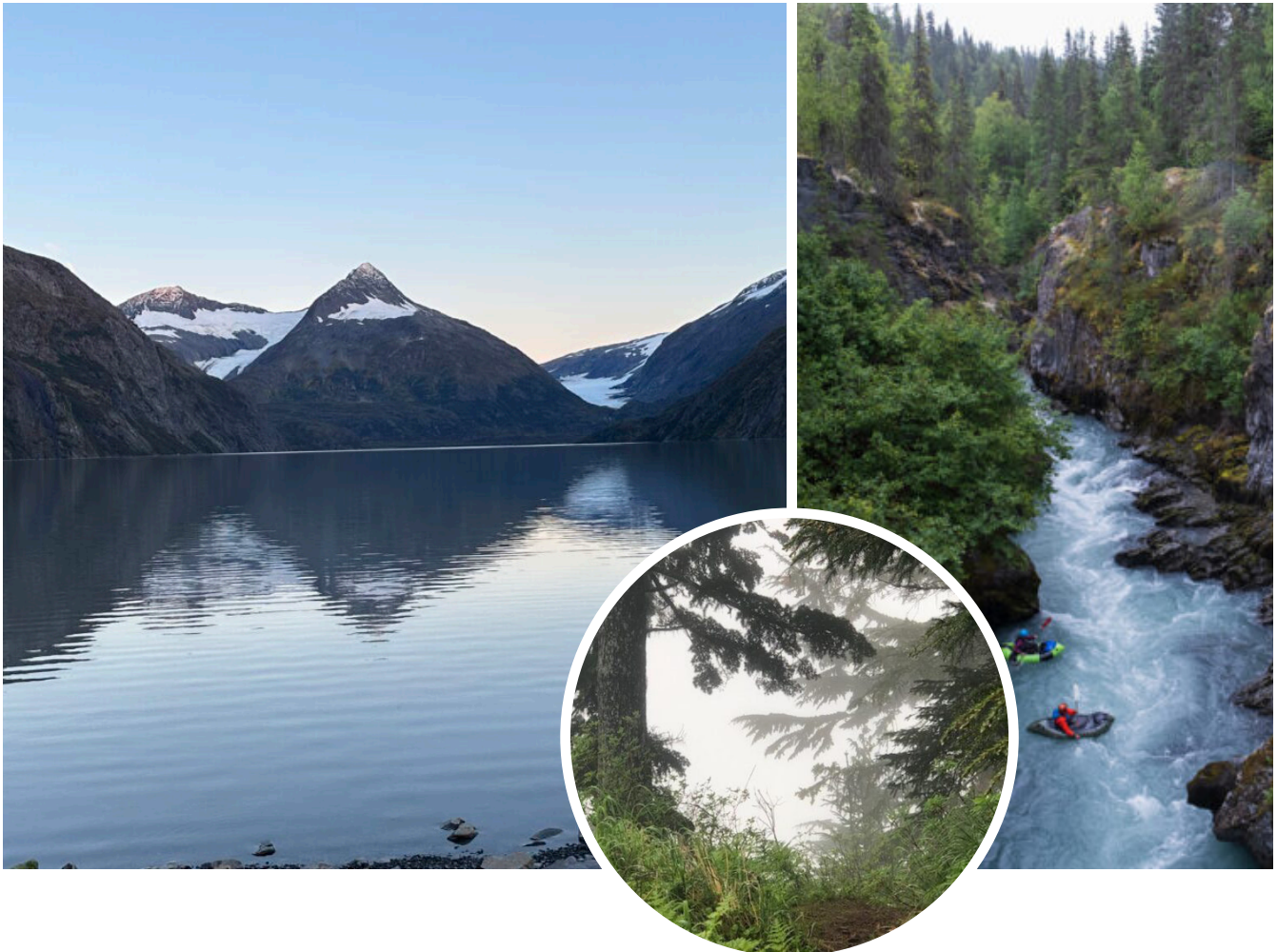


# STORYTELLING

In FY25, we were thrilled to continue our partnership with local author and mountain runner Sean Ulman to expand the Trail Mix Journal—an ongoing storytelling series that celebrates trails across the Kenai Mountains–Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area.

The Trail Mix Journal features creative writing from local contributors, each centered on a single trail of importance to them. Published on our website, these stories invite readers to experience trails in a new way and inspire them to explore paths they may not have discovered otherwise.

This year, we welcomed contributions from Abby Host, Brian Wright, Anna Testore, and Joseph Nyholm, who shared their personal experiences on Long Lake, Sixmile, Victor Creek, and Lost Lake—adding new voices and perspectives to the growing collection.



# EVENTS

In FY25, the Spencer Dash once again brought together runners, families, and volunteers for a joyful day on the trail. Set against the stunning backdrop of Spencer Glacier, the race welcomed 95 runners, along with a vibrant crowd of supporters who showed up with energy, glittered race faces, and a few happy dogs to run the course too.

The Alaska Railroad—an important part of Alaska’s and KMTA’s cultural heritage—gave participants a unique way to access the event, connecting them to the region’s history as they travel to the trailhead. The race itself feels like a journey through time, offering a window into the past while highlighting the present-day geomorphology of a stunning and rapidly changing landscape.

At its core, the Spencer Dash is about celebrating this wild place, honoring the historical contributions of Alaska’s industries while inviting participants to reflect on what it means to be responsible stewards of our public lands.

This year’s event was made possible through strong partnerships and a dedicated team effort. We’re grateful to Alaska Railroad for helping make access to Spencer possible, and to Chugach Adventures for their logistical support. We’re also grateful to the volunteer trail crew who brushed the trail and United States Forest Service staff who helped prepare the course, as well as our sponsors (Skinny Raven, Girdwood Brewing Company, Kaladi Brothers, and Moose’s Tooth) for contributing to a fun and memorable event.





## TRAILS AND INTERPRETATION

Over the summer, KMTA staff and volunteers supported trail maintenance and interpretation efforts across the region, improving access and enhancing the visitor experience along the historic Iditarod National Historic Trail and surrounding areas.

With support from 13 volunteers and in partnership with the United States Forest Service, crews installed 16 interpretive signs, brushed and maintained 9 miles of trail, and completed cleanup and maintenance at three campsites. In total, volunteers hiked more than 24 miles to carry out this work.

Projects took place across several key locations, including Spencer Glacier, Vagt Lake, Ptarmigan Creek, Meridian Lake, Grayling Lake, Divide, Primrose, and the Moose Pass segment of the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

# THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

- Adrift Prints
- Alaska Community Foundation
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game
- Alaska Geographic
- Alaska Office of Boating Safety
- Alaska Public Lands Information Center
- Alaska Railroad
- Alaska Resource Education
- Alaska Resource Management
- Alaska Rivers Co.
- Alaska Sea Grant
- Alaska SeaLife Center
- Alaska State Parks
- Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center
- Alyeska Resort
- Anchorage School District
- Andrew Bacon
- Atwood Foundation
- Begich, Boggs Visitor Center
- Bureau of Land Management
- Campbell Creek Science Center
- Chugach Adventures
- Chugach Avalanche Center
- Chugach National Forest
- Chugach School District
- Cook Inlet Tug & Barge
- First National Bank Alaska
- Four Valleys Community School
- Hope & Sunrise Historical Society Museum
- Huebsch Foundation
- Kayak Adventures Worldwide
- Kenai Fjords National Park
- Kenai Peninsula Borough School District
- Kenai Watershed Forum
- Marc Swanson
- Mariah Johnson
- Miller's Landing
- Moose Pass Community Library
- Mount Marathon Race Committee
- National Park Foundation
- National Park Friends Alliance
- National Park Service
- Ocean Alaska Science and Learning Center
- Olive Jordan
- Peppercini's Catering
- Premier Alaska Tours
- Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council
- Saltchuk
- Sean Ulman
- Seward Community Foundation
- Seward Community Garden by the Bay
- Seward Community Library and Museum
- Seward PTA
- Seward Prevention Coalition
- Seward Yoga
- Sis's Cafe and Catering
- The Seward Folly
- Trout Unlimited
- United States Forest Service
- University of Alaska
- Victor Chen
- Whittier Parks and Rec
- Our Volunteer Trail Crew

