Drawing Crowds on Kachemak Bay

One of Alaska EPSCoR's central outreach efforts takes place at the end of the road.

For the past three years, researchers and staff from EPSCoR's Southcentral Test Case have partnered with Homer's Kachemak Bay Research Reserve to present a hands-on "Discovery Labs" to local schools and the public.

"We're lucky to partner with the Reserve in that they help us to reach a broader community than we do on our own," said Courtney Breest, EPSCoR's University of Alaska Anchorage Outreach Coordinator. "They help us get our research and the information we want out to the public."

Each EPSCoR Discovery Lab features tables of hands-on activities designed to teach about EPSCoR's science efforts on the Kenai Peninsula, which focus on the capacity of communities to adapt to change, with a special emphasis on salmon fisheries. Some tables have featured sediment cores for students to examine through microscopes; a salmon board game with accompanying videos from EPSCoR's "SalmonSim" visualizations; materials to make salmon life cycle bracelets; and a snow cone maker, used to teach students about ancient underground food storage methods – substituting ice, fruit leather and Swedish fish for moss, bark and salmon.

"We try to have something hands-on at every station, whether it's something that the public can touch, or something that they can manipulate, or something that they can play with, with the assistance of an expert," explained Carmen Field, an Aquatic Education Specialist with the Reserve.

EPSCoR began working with the Reserve in 2013. Each summer EPSCoR and the Reserve collaborate to put on multiple public labs at Homer's Islands and Oceans Visitor Center, which attract both locals and visitors.

"It's Homer in the summer and there's a good amount of tourism, so sometimes we were talking to people about salmon for the first time," Breest said. "Or sometimes they're really pleasantly surprised to learn about research being conducted in Alaska in a general sense."

In addition to the public labs, EPSCoR and the Reserve also have local school groups visit the center in late spring. The labs are also packed up and taken on the road – or rather, off the road – each year for visits to the remote communities of Seldovia, Nanwalek and Port Graham.

photo by Courtney Breest/Alaska EPSCoR

Homer students learn about sediment cores from Kachemak Bay Research Reserve volunteer Susan Clardy at an April 2015 Discovery Lab at the Homer Island and Oceans Visitors Center.

The Reserve also conducts Discovery Labs with many other local organizations and partners, Field said, but noted that EPSCoR is unique in the degree to which EPSCoR staff and researchers help put together the content of the events. She also said the local relevance of Southcentral Test Case research makes it a natural fit for the labs.

"We want students to understand how the science they are learning is relevant to them," she noted. "It's easy to do with EPSCoR because a lot of that involves fish and fishing, and pretty much everybody is tied to that around here."

Alaska EPSCoR

Alaska EPSCOR is funded through NSF award #OIA-1208927 & the State of Alaska

NSF