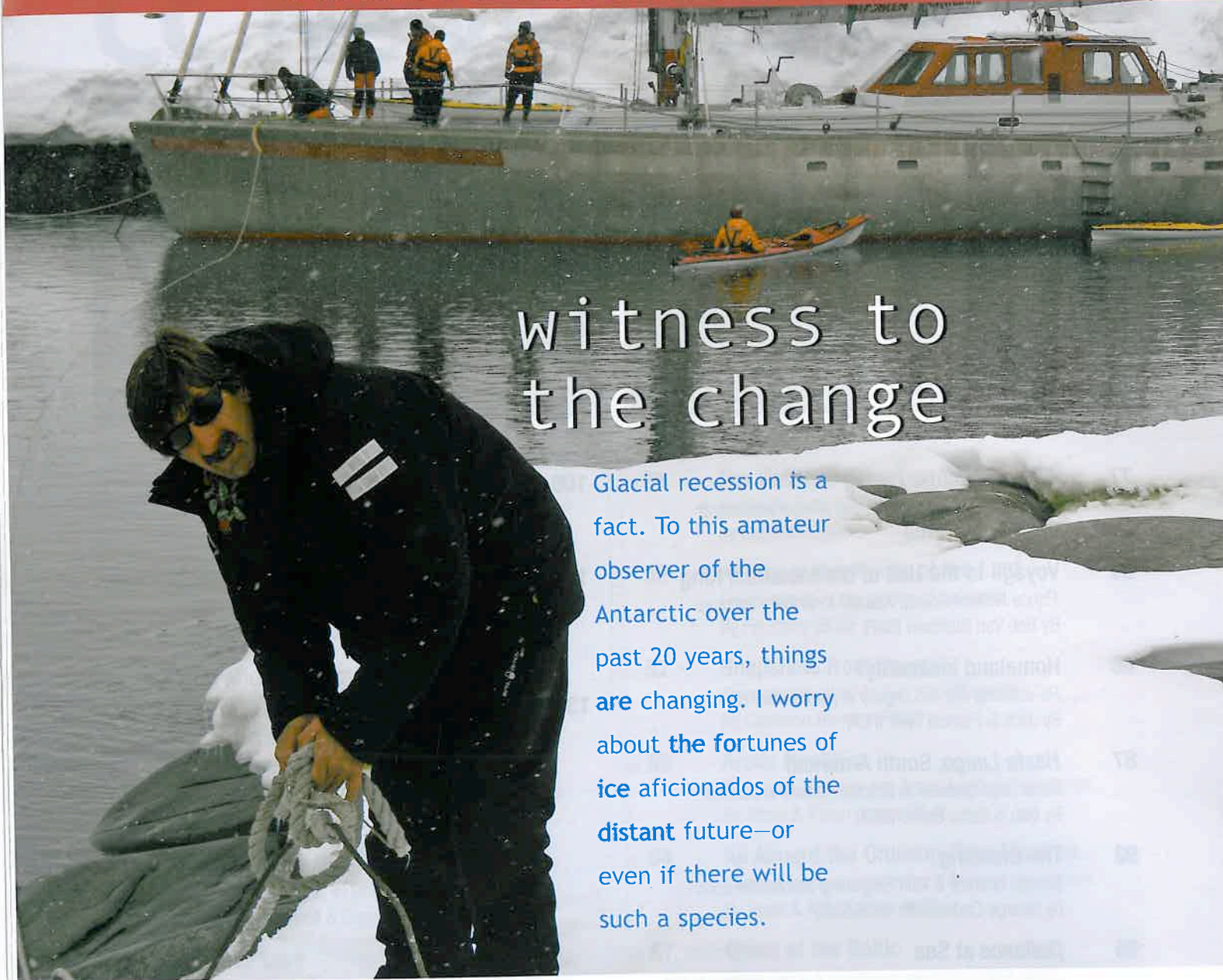


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witness to the change

Glacial recession is a fact. To this amateur observer of the Antarctic over the past 20 years, things are changing. I worry about the fortunes of ice aficionados of the distant future—or even if there will be such a species.

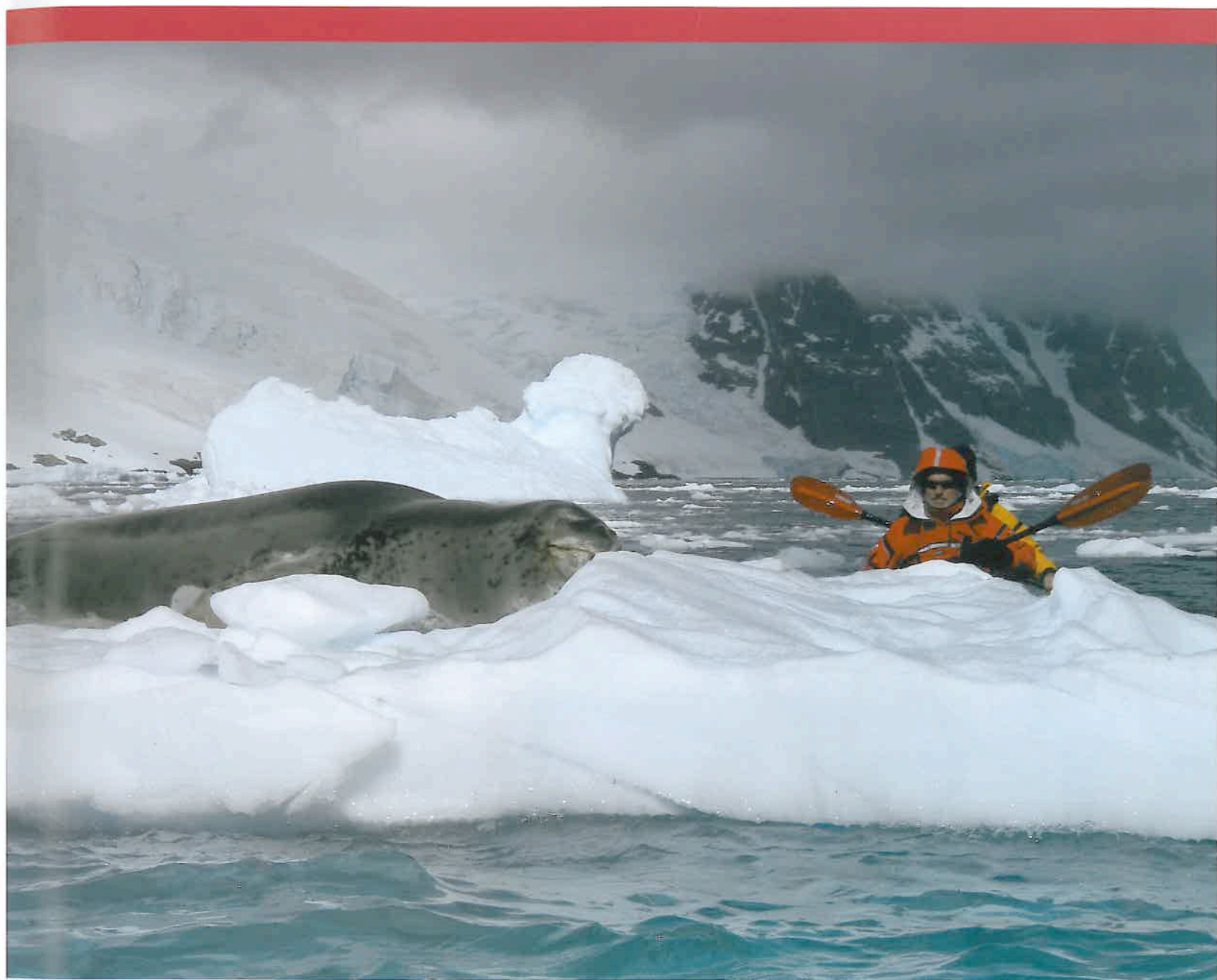
By Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

GLOBAL WARMING IS ON EVERYONE'S MIND THESE DAYS—and if you're a sailor so it should be. We were privileged to have hosted a National Geographic environmental project on board *Pelagic Australis* in January of 2008. Led by Jon Bowermaster, who gathered together an eclectic group of seven—adventurers, media facilitators, and storytellers all—we spent a month on the Antarctic Peninsula in aid of Jon's last in the series of films of his Oceans Eight Project. Highlighting how seashores, marine habitats, and the people who live on or near them are being adversely affected by man's activities, he has used kayaks as a mode of travel to visit some of the more remote parts of the world during the last ten years. On this voyage, Jon's mission was to

make a 50-minute documentary for National Geographic television, in addition to placing articles in their magazines and running a website live from the expedition.

In order to kayak in the Antarctic, his most elaborate project to date, his team needed a support vessel, and that's where *Pelagic Australis* and her crew came in. The original idea was to kayak and camp in the Weddell Sea along the east coast of the Peninsula, and to avoid the west coast, which sees heavy traffic from cruise ships and other yachts. In the last few years the sea ice, which often per-

(above) Skip secures *Pelagic Australis* to a rock bollard in the Fish Islands, one of the few safe anchorages in Crystal Sound; (next page) expedition leader Jon Bowermaster and kayak expert Graham Charles schmooze a leopard seal, Lemaire Channel



sists in the Weddell right through the summer, has, as in parts of the Northwest Passage, largely disappeared. In addition, sections of the Larsen Ice Shelf, farther south, have been breaking away from the continent with alarming frequency. The idea was to paddle as far south as possible in this untraveled world, making observations on the way and highlighting these phenomena in film and print.

Our departure point was the Chilean outpost of Puerto Williams on the Beagle Channel. Jon and the team flew in from Punta Arenas with tons of equipment—and proceeded to enjoy New Year's Eve at the ad hoc yachtsman's watering hole and naval wreck, the *Micalvi*, known to all who have sailed south desiring a Pisco sour.

After household and safety briefings on January 1, we set sail across the Drake Passage bound for King George

Island, where we would meet the kayaks and our Kiwi kayak expert, Graham Charles. King George has a Chilean naval airstrip, and the adjacent village is a popular cruise ship stop—handy, as the three 17-foot double-kayaks were sent south with Lindblad's *National Geographic Endeavour* earlier and were waiting for us in a shed.

An uneventful Drake crossing by definition is a good crossing, and we admit without shame to motorsailing when the speed dropped below 7 knots. Cutting out the exposure to what can be catastrophic weather in this stretch of ocean is the key.

The previous winter's temperatures on the peninsula were reported as severe and we had been somewhat preoccupied that the Weddell might still be ice-bound in January (and not least of all contra-indicating to the intended mes-



Our "furthest south" in Crystal Sound, the kayaks—and *Pelagic Australis*, more to the point—were blocked by large plates of last year's sea ice



sage of the project!). Enter Rodrigo Jordan, team member, Chilean mountaineer, entrepreneur, and an old friend of Jon's. In order to save time, he suggested we ask the base commander to fly us over the Weddell for a recce to see if the area was practicable not only for kayaks, but also a 74-foot sailboat. The commander obliged (for a fee) seeing it was Sunday, and within a few hours we were airborne in a Twin Otter flying low across the Bransfield Straits, buzzing icebergs for pictures and film. Antarctic Sound, separating Joinville Island and the tip of the peninsula, is the gateway to the Weddell. Virtually ice-free with scattered big bergs, our optimism soared—to be short lived—as farther south the entire archipelago around Vega, James Ross, and Snow Hill Islands were beset by sea ice still fast to the shore. In effect there was no shelter for *Pelagic Australis* and no access for the kayaks to the inshore waters.

We had no option but to shift gears and head south along the west coast, and come what may. Rather than a continuous voyage by kayak in a remote area, Jon decided to modify our plan and kayak not to avoid human traffic, but to use the opportunity to seek out the transient people who frequent this ice-free coast in summer, not least of all the surfeit of tourists on cruise ships. Rather than use *Pelagic Australis* as a loose



(from top) Cameraman John Armstrong on a Fish Islands summit for a time-lapse sunset; capturing an ice-arch collapse; Fiona snaps a crabeater seal on sea ice

cover, she would be alongside the kayaks during the day and be more of a base camp, where the kayakers would return after completing the day's activities. Needless to say, the prospect of a shore camp in two-man tents eating freeze-dried was soon shelved for the comforts of our main saloon and a three-course dinner, followed by a good sleep. But in fairness, in order to work properly they also needed an office. By day and sometimes late into the night, the main saloon was used to edit pictures, service camera equipment, write articles for the web, and communicate out. Indeed, ours was not so much hard adventure but more about documenting the changes to the Antarctic landscape—and for this you need a secure and comfortable platform, not least of all to think straight when it's blowing a gale outside.

In spite of this change of plan, a focus was still needed for continuity. For the next three weeks our routine was to paddle south whenever possible and see how far we could get. The film team, led by John Armstrong, stayed on *Pelagic Australis* getting the beauty shots, often with the camera on the tripod on the foredeck, or from the end of the spinnaker

pole, or from the masthead. Such was the professionalism (and rivalry) of our team that John was in frequent conflict of interest with Nat Geo stills shooter Peter McBride for these positions. Pete would later do one better by donning a diver's drysuit and taking underwater shots of the kayaks skimming close alongside icebergs. Graham Charles was shooting "onboard" the kayaks with a custom camera pole on the cockpit hood, and his voice was wired to Jon's in the lead kayak—they would chatter away. Graham has the distinction of completing a trio of extreme kayak adventures with his two partners over the last five years—in 2005 they were the first to circumnavigate South Georgia, the Holy Grail for the global kayak fraternity.

Every day we would try and arrange a human "encounter" for interviews on camera. Some of these were fortuitous; others made by prior arrangement, like the visit to Palmer Station, the U.S. National Science Foundation's biological field station on Anvers Island. Here, dozens of scientists supported by base personnel conduct ongoing studies of biological-related issues on the peninsula.

For me the highlight was paddling through Lemaire Channel, aka "Kodak Valley," a narrow cut between the mainland and Booth Island, well remembered by anyone who has passed through by ship or small boat. Jon's partner, Australian wildlife artist and illustrator Fiona Stewart, was in the front cockpit. I gave her a thrill when we approached a leopard seal on a floe by less than half a kayak length—and was surprised that this top predator took almost no notice of us. We paddled contentedly through this icy labyrinth on a fair current, and hours later entered the Penola Straits. *Pelagic Australis* and crew Stew Richardson, Jess Hay, and Ollie Hicks were ahead, already at anchor at Pleneau Island. We were looking forward to our aperitif, dinner, and a good sleep.

And so our "encounters" went on: The visit to the earnest Oceanites team on Peterman Island. This D.C.-based research group was living in tents astride a penguin colony and monitoring the effects of tourist visits on the

wildlife; the "must stop" of the peninsula to see our perennial friends at Port Lockroy, an ex-British Antarctic Survey base, now the de facto visitor center for the cruise ship industry manned and managed by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust, complete with Her Majesty's Post Office!; the presentation Jon made to his associates and the guests on board Lindblad's *National Geographic Endeavour*; the comic relief at the Ukranian base Vernadsky, where we drank far too much of their home-distilled vodka; mutual visits with the British cutter *Discoverer* and her Joint Services climbing team, and more.

Eventually we ducked below the level of wholesale tourist traffic and paddled into Crystal Sound to below the Antarctic Circle at 66°30'S. Here vestiges of last winter's sea ice collide with sparkling glacial bergs adrift on wind and current. We followed the kayakers through an ever-constricting maze of giant white plates until they could go no further, hauling out on ice fast to the distant shore.

Pelagic Australis firmly planted her bow in the shelf, we jumped "onboard," and struggled the anchor onto the ice to use as a deadman. At once, our mission was forgotten and we spent the windless afternoon just fooling around, playing ad hoc soccer with a ball of rags tied up with string. Our action men Sean Farrell, Ollie, and Pete goaded each other into doing back flips stark naked off bergy bits into the sub-zero water (oh, youth!). For once, no one seemed interested in filming, recording, or communicating.

Baptism of ice: Ollie and Sean launch the kayaks for the first time, Enterprise Island; Peter McBride's bravura backflip into -1.5 degree bergy water

The blinding white light of midday warms through stages throughout the afternoon, and for a few hours global warming and grim scenarios are forgotten. Why did I come here all those years ago? Remember? Yes, it was simply for the doing. I feel once again that sensation of spiritual oneness with the Antarctic that has been repeated over and over on every voyage south. 