By the early 1980s, Sen. Vic Fischer introduced a bill in the Alaska State Legislature to establish the first state marine parks. Johannsen had just returned from a four-year hiatus, during which he worked for the California State Parks system, and found Fischer's marine park proposal well under way. That was good news to Johanssen, who before leaving Alaska had pressed the marine park issue whenever he could: With the Legislature, through editorials and in magazine feature articles. He was relieved to see that the idea had not faded during his absence.

In "Alaska Marine Park System: Potential Units in Prince William Sound, Alaska," published in 1983, more than 46 state marine parks were proposed. The Legislature whittled that down to 13, but it was a start.

Bettles, Horseshoe, Shoup and Sawmill Bay State Marine Parks were among the first to be designated on July 16, 1983, setting the framework for the 35 marine parks there are today. Much of the funding for the additions where the result of damages from the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which devastated Prince William Sound in April 1989.

MORE THAN THE PARKS

With these acquisitions came the need to create some order within the division. Division leaders began to create sections to oversee a state park system bigger than any other in the country.

"There are so many more facets to the division than just the land itself," said Deputy Director Claire Holland LeClair, who replaced Degernes in 2010.

Working cooperatively among the sections has always been critical to the success of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. Bill Evans has been a landscape architect with the Division's Park Design and

Alaska's State Marine Parks ensure Alaskan's and our guests can enjoy power boating, kayaking and canoeing and shoreline camping throughout Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound and Kachemak Bay. An excellent example of the love for our marine recreation is the latest addition to a number of the state's water trails. The Kachemak Bay Water Trail, dedicated in 2014 and the product of a group of volunteers, inspires exploration, understand and stewardship of the natural treasure that is Kachemak Bay.

Ben Ellis, Director, Department of Parks and Outdoor Recreation

8

Marine Parks

Making the most of Alaska's varied coastline

With nearly 34,000 miles of coastline, it is no wonder that people are drawn to Alaska's maritime environment. Here is a place where, within minutes, a person can reach true wilderness. The coastline includes some of the most pristine land in the country and scenic landscapes of the state.

It was one of the things that attracted Neil Johannsen when he came to Alaska in 1971. Drawn to the contrast between stark mountains and turbulent seas, he became enthralled with boating soon after arriving. He built his own sailboat, the sloop Nellie Juan, in the years 1973 and 1974, and sailed it through Prince William Sound, Resurrection Bay and Kachemak Bay for years. Johannsen got to know the tucked-away treasures of Alaska's coastline. Setting aside some of that coastline as state park land was one of his goals when he became chief of planning for Alaska State Parks in 1975.

"Many areas that were to become marine parks were explored on Nellie Juan," Johannsen said. "The concept of creating marine parks evolved to a great degree aboard that 31-foot sailboat."

Today, there are 35 state marine parks, ranging from the 62-acre Joe Mace Island State Marine Park east of Wrangell to the massive 103,600-acre St. James Bay, about 30 miles northeast of Juneau. These parks, mostly undeveloped, can be found in protected coves, outer coastlines, hidden bays and along vast, open stretches of seashore. They represent some of the state's most pristine coastal areas. Because they are protected, they will provide recreation opportunities for generations to come.

The parks also offer an economic boost to the state, attracting resident visitors as well as those living outside Alaska.

In "An Economic Report: How State Park Visitors Impact Prince William Sound/Resurrection Bay Communities," presented in 2008 by researchers Lee Elder and Bob Gorman, the study showed that in 2006, visitors to state parks, particularly marine parks, spent an estimated $12.2 million.

The majority of Alaska's state marine parks came into being in large chunks—the first being added in 1983 and the second in 1990. The state carefully chose, through the Statehood Act of 1958, the lands that it thought would make the most of Alaska's coastline. The first 11 state marine parks were a result of the dream of several very dedicated people—including Johannsen —who worked tirelessly to get the idea of marine parks in the collective consciouness. Seven years later, some 15 parcels would be added to the mix. By 1993—due, ironically, to the devastation of the Exxon Valdez oil spill—even more were added.

Gov. Bill Sheffield signs the first marine park bill, 1983.
Left to right: Executive director of the Alaska Environmental Lobby Jay Nelson, Gov. Bill Sheffield and director of Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation Neil Johannsen.

Photo courtesy of Neil Johannsen

MARINE PARKS GAIN HOLD

Al Meiners was a park planner when he first met Johannsen in the mid 1970s. The two worked in the Alaska State Park system, both had gone to the University of Washington graduate school, studying parks and forestry, and both were avid boaters.

"Marine parks has an interesting history," said Meiners. "Both Neil and I were boaters and we paid a lot of attention to the boating in [Washington's] Puget Sound and all along the coast."

"It was in the late '70s, and we noticed that the [U.S.] Forest Service was not doing a very good job with recreation; they were mostly timber-oriented. We decided we ought to do something about that."

So they did.

What followed was a combination of public-media campaign blitz, legislative bargaining and budget reorganizing to shift marine parks from an idea to a reality.

"It was my *dream* – but not *just my* dream," Johannsen stressed. "Others, I learned, shared it. The concept for a system of marine parks through Southeast Alaska up through Prince William Sound, Resurrection Bay and even to the west from there, evolved from the collective thinking and research of four people who deserve the merit badge for these parks: Hilton Wolfe, a former English professor at University of Alaska Fairbanks and then Southeast superintendent of parks; his Haines district ranger, Chuck Horner, a former Methodist minister; Al Meiners, active ocean kayaker and planner with parks; and myself."

The men were smart about branding the state marine park idea. Johannsen, through contacts in the media, began writing articles touting the idea.

In one such article, "Marine Parks for Alaska: The International Connection," written in 1979 and printed in Alaska Magazine, he proposed a waterways connection from Alaska to Canada, using state marine parks as the stopping points.

"Planned for boaters and fly-in recreationists will be 163 marine parks; most an easy one-day boat trip from one to another," he wrote. The marine waterway system he described would stretch some 1,600 miles, connecting boaters in the Lower 48 states to those in Alaska.

"In Alaska, 54 percent of all residents participate in boating, a rate far higher than the national average," he wrote. "Boat ownership in the Seattle area is the highest of any large city in the nation."

The vision that Meiners, Horner, Johannsen and Wolfe had for the series of marine parks was grand. The Statehood Act of 1958 allowed the state to select up to 400,000 acres of federal land to be set aside for community expansion or recreation, and it was this act that the men set their sights toward. Then Governor Jay Hammond and attorney general Avrum Gross supported the idea, and in December 1977, the state submitted its selections to the U.S. Forest Service.

"Areas were carefully selected for scenic quality, productive sport fishing and protection from prevailing winds," Johannsen wrote. "Recreational opportunities include beachcombing, crabbing, shrimping, hunting, camping, scuba diving, observing wildlife or visiting historical areas."

The selections included 25 areas in Prince William Sound and 39 areas in Southeast Alaska, a dream that has yet to be fulfilled. In late 1979, the Forest Service had approved only three of the proposed 64 parks.

But the foursome did not give up that easily. Alaska's coastal regions simply had to be represented as part of the state park system.

"Chip Dennerlein was the community involvement coordinator for that project," Meiners said. Dennerlein went from town to town drumming up support for the project. "Cordova was supportive, Valdez was on board. Seward was a little coolish at first but then warmed up to the idea."

Meiners used whatever connections he had to protect the land that he saw as being overlogged. Not only was it ugly, he said, but also the shallow soil could not support the clear-cutting and created an environmental mess for the coastline.

"The clear cuts were horrible out there," he said.

Meiners confided that he had a classmate from college who worked for the Forest Service at the time. "He gave me all the proposed timber sales, and we filed selections on a number of them. I think we got a few, and that stopped their timber sales. It was an interesting little land grab."

The key to moving from earmarked parks to actual parks, though, lay in the support of the Legislature,

and the men had that in Sen. Vic Fischer, who was an avid ocean kayaker and supporter of the state marine parks concept. He'd spent time paddling the waters of Glacier Bay and Prince William Sound and recognized the latter as some of the most beautiful country in the state.

"I remember I was working with Neil on something else park related," said Fischer, now retired from the Legislature and living in Anchorage. "We got to talking about ocean kayaking, so he said, 'we need legislation to introduce it, would you carry it for us?' and I said, 'of, course,' because I thought it was a great idea."

To Fischer, leaving some of the coastal regions of Alaska open for recreation seemed like an ideal use of the land. Not only would these parcels give recreationists a place to go, but also the landscapes would be protected from further timber development and degradation.

"The state was entitled to selection of lands [under the Statehood Act] for recreation purposes," he said. "We were essentially taking land from what was closed Forest Service land so that it wasn't really affecting any private ownership or miners or anyone who might have an interest in it."

In the Senate, Fischer said he had no trouble getting his fellow lawmakers to agree on the state marine parks idea. He remembers it being a pretty easy sell.

"The spark was given to me, and I just carried it through," he said.

Eleven state marine parks—five in Southeast and the remaining six in Prince William Sound and Southcentral Alaska—passed the House and Senate and were signed into law on July 16, 1983.

"I remember being totally obsessed with working that bill through the Legislature; nothing mattered more to me at that time," Johannsen said. One of the high points to his career with state parks, he said, was watching Gov. Bill Sheffield sign the marine parks bill.

EXPANDING THE PARKS

Johannsen, still director during the late '80s, continued to push for more state marine parks. The project was not complete, he said.

"I was totally, absurdly nuts that the bill came to be to get more of these marine parks," he said.

In a fit of inspiration, Johannsen called Craig Medred, a well-known outdoors writer in Anchorage, to accompany him on a marine park scouting trip. The two went to Prince William Sound and Johannsen showed Medred, also a boater and lover of the sea, the areas he favored.

"I remember it well," Medred said. "Whittier was nothing. The Sound was a wilderness. … There might have been one or two charters then doing kayak drop offs out of Whittier, but there couldn't have been more than that."

Medred and Johannsen explored areas of the Sound that could be potential sites.

"We hiked around in a bunch of places and talked about what to do to make the Sound a little more accessible," he said. "There aren't a lot of good places for camping, and there weren't then any easy places for someone to tie up a boat."

Still, even Medred saw the value in adding more parks. A former Juneau resident, he had come to appreciate the state parks forming in that region.

"The state park system had already begun to pioneer marine parks in Southeast Alaska, and I was well familiar with them from having used the docks in Taku Harbor and Funter Bay while sailing all over that region. So we talked a lot about how to make the Sound more accessible, like Southeast."

Medred supported the idea, and former Anchorage Times publisher Bob Atwood approved an editorial in the paper backing it. By April 1990, Gov. Steve Cowper had signed Senate Bill 42 into reality creating 13 more parks, and by June 14, 1990, it was official: Those 13, plus two more, expanded the marine park system by 15.

DEVASTATION LEADS TO PROTECTION

On an early spring day, March 24, 1989, the oil tanker Exxon Valdez slammed into Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, spilling an estimated 750,000 barrels of crude oil. The devastation it would leave behind in the waters and along the shoreline of the Sound could not even be fathomed on the day of the incident.

But within 24 hours, the reality set in. The oil would pollute nearly 11,000 square miles of water and spoil 1,300 miles of coastline.

Rick Steiner was one of the first people to realize the enormity of the problem. A University of Alaska marine adviser, he immediately, upon learning of the spill, set about making sure it was never to happen again.

"We realized you can't clean it up, you can't fix the damage, the only thing we can do and the minimum we can do is to protect [the region] from more damage," said Steiner, who today works as a consultant and has helped advise cleanup efforts on oil spills worldwide.

After the spill, Steiner, along with a cadre of defenders of the Sound known as The Coastal Coalition, helped craft a $2 billion settlement from Exxon Corp. in October 1991. Paramount to their argument was that work to restore the damaged land should begin immediately.

"There is an immediate opportunity to protect, through acquisition, threatened habitat within the region," the Coalition wrote in the draft proposal for settlement.

Of the settlement, Steiner said, about half of that money went to habitat protection, in the form of new marine parks, and purchases of inholdings in existing parklands that completed vast regions of protected land.

"It's the one shining lining from the entire oil spill," Steiner said. "We were able to protect coastal habitat that needed protecting."

Today's marine parks continue to be one of the most distinctive aspects of the Alaska State Park system. Because the majority of the parks are left in their natural state, they retain the early Alaska wilderness feel that Craig Medred, Al Meiners, Vic Fischer and others recognized and sought to protect.

"Certainly in Southeast Alaska the marine parks were huge," Meiners said; in Prince William Sound they are now blossoming. They add a variety the park system lacked in its early days.

Fischer agrees.

"It was a marvelous idea," Fischer said. "Subsequently, I kayaked right into some of those places that we helped create and I said, 'wow, we have preserved this for recreation.' That is such a good thing. It's great to know that somebody can kayak through the inland waters, through Prince William Sound, and

know that there are state parks; that there is a good, secure, safe place to camp out, to come ashore or even if you're with a boat, a safe place to anchor."

"It's good from a recreation standpoint and as an Alaskan to know there are these protected areas."

For Johannsen, who has spent a good part of his retirement aboard his current sailboat, the Detour, there is still work to be done. He says 35 marine parks are a good start but there are many more areas along Alaska's spectacular coastline that merit park designation.

"There are many more awaiting action by today's Alaskans," Johannsen said. "The 'system' is not done."