

The gnarled old birches along Kodiak Island's American River are chartreuse, ivory and butterscotch; bald eagles on the tideflats flash charcoal and chalk in the afternoon sun; fallow fields spread umber grass against the distant galvanic blue of Chiniak Bay. Driving along America's second-largest island, it's hard to imagine truer colors in nature's palette, or a more inviting scene, but as we climb up out of the valley heading northeast, back toward town, my local tour guide declares an even better sight ahead.

"Once we get up on the headland here, we'll start catching glimpses of our turbines across the water," Dake Schmidt observes.

He's referring to Kodiak's three brand-new, 1.5-megawatt wind-power turbines, and the notable emphasis there is the word "our." These turbines, which can produce up to a quarter of Kodiak's electricity, are a source of immense community pride. Brought online in mid-2009, the turbines significantly reduce Kodiak's need for diesel-powered generators to supplement the island's 15-megawatt hydroelectric facility. On average, about 89 percent of Kodiak's power now comes from renewable sources, a measure far above almost any other place in the country.

It's just one facet of Kodiak's campaign to become one of the most sustainable communities in the nation, a place where residents make respectful and efficient use of the resources they have and import



Kodiak Island's three 1.5-megawatt wind-power turbines move the community significantly closer to independence from fossil fuels.

Greening KODIAK

An Alaska island embraces
the power of sustainability

BY ERIC LUCAS



DAKE SCHMIDT



Visiting Kodiak Island

Though it is a remote, largely wilderness island in the Gulf of Alaska, Kodiak is easy to get to, with multiple daily flights from Anchorage offered by Alaska Airlines and its partner Era Alaska; for details visit alaskaair.com.

Visitor services on Kodiak are almost entirely contained within the town of Kodiak, just 5 miles from the island airport, which it shares with the Kodiak Coast Guard base. The town has several hotels, 40 B&Bs, a half-dozen good restaurants, even its own brewpub. Car rentals are available at the airport. An excellent B&B, Galley Gourmet Cliff House, offers cozy rooms in a spacious top-of-the-bluff home with exceptional water views and gourmet meals; call 907-486-5079 or visit www.galleygourmet.biz.

Kodiak town itself is a charming, eminently walkable waterfront village, with a small but excellent museum focusing on the island's Russian heritage, and a nearby companion museum depicting the 7,500-year



JACK KIRCHHOFFER, COURTESY: KODIAK ISLAND CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

as little as possible from outside. Islanders are expanding home gardens, weatherizing their homes, embracing solar power, promoting recycling, learning food preservation, installing heat pumps, practicing sustainable fisheries, patronizing thrift stores and forming community groups to share their experiences helping the island achieve a green lifestyle. After all, Kodiak is nicknamed the “Emerald Isle.”

“People who live here want to preserve this island,” says Donna Jones, one de facto leader of a group known as “Sustainable Kodiak,” which, as she humorously explains, is pretty informal. “We have no dues, no budget, no officers, no formal membership, no scheduled meetings. I suppose we have more than 150 people on our e-mail list. All we do is connect people who want to help Kodiak be a better place.”

For a remote island highly dependent, in the past, on outside supplies that range from cement to hamburger to diesel fuel, sustainability may seem a quixotic goal. As for all such locales, the towering challenge is energy, but if Kodiak Electric Association adds three more wind turbines—which it already has permits, sites and plans for—the renewable-power percentage will rise to 95 percent. And if the island installs a third turbine at its remote hydroelectric facility, it would become the first community in the United States to derive all the power for its

Kodiak bears, above, are icons of the Emerald Isle. In addition to wildlife viewing, visitors enjoy fly-fishing the island's many streams, such as Salonie Creek, left.

17- to 25-megawatt average load from renewable sources—almost 100 percent of its electricity.

That would be a grand accomplishment for a remote island in the Gulf of Alaska with a Kodiak bear (3,500 on the Kodiak archipelago) for every four residents (14,000 people). The Kodiak bear is a distinct subspecies of brown bear, with males weighing up to 1,500 pounds and reaching 10 feet standing upright.

That's big, but so is Kodiak, and residents will tell you it's as unique as its famous bears. In America, only the Big Island of Hawai'i is a larger island; on Alaska maps, where Kodiak perches in the North Pacific near the Katmai Coast about 200 miles southwest of Anchorage, the 3,500-square-mile island has so many inlets, bays and peninsulas it looks like a complicated jigsaw-puzzle piece.

It's unique environmentally as well as geographically. The island was for millennia treeless, and much of it, thus, is a wind-, sun- and rain-scoured hummock in the sea with its bones visible in the form of rock slopes, deep gullies and high escarpments. Spruce trees arrived at the north



COURTESY: KODIAK ISLAND CVB

habitation of the island by the Alutiq people. Fort Abercrombie State Historical Park features mature spruce forests, World War II gun batteries, a small lake and a lovely small beach with picnic tables.

Most visitor activities on Kodiak involve trips to remote locations for wildlife viewing, fishing or hunting, with various guides and wilderness lodges offering services. Dake Schmidt specializes in daylong vehicle tours and fishing trips accessible by road from Kodiak town; call 907-486-7000 or visit www.memorymakersinak.com. Brigid and Harry Dodge of Kodiak Treks operate a remote lodge at a prime location inside Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, and practice both sustainable tourism and low-impact wildlife viewing; visit www.kodiaktreks.com.

For general information about Kodiak, visit the island's CVB at www.kodiak.org. —E.L.

Sustainable Communities

Numerous cities, towns and other jurisdictions throughout the United States are pursuing sustainability. Audubon International has a program called “Sustainable Communities” that assists in these efforts. The organization helps participating jurisdictions assess the current status of 15 factors, ranging from agriculture to transportation, prepare goals and objectives, and track the results.

“Suppose, for instance, a community decides it wants to support sustainable agriculture through farmers markets,” explains program manager Suzi Zakowski. “We’ll help them identify where their food’s coming from now, how they might support local farmers better, and how they can boost the number of farmers markets.”

For more information on the program, visit <http://scp.auduboninternational.org>.

Some other notable community examples:

Portland: Often rated America’s most sustainable community, Portland first adopted sustainability as a formal philosophy in 1994. Oregon’s leading city boasts a comprehensive light-rail system that embraces all four quadrants of the metropolitan area; is a world leader in construction of LEED-certified buildings; offers free light-rail transit in the downtown core; and fosters a bike- and pedestrian-friendly ethos that places it at the top of national lists for cycling and walking.

San Francisco: A leader in progressive policies for more than 150 years, San Francisco has banned plastic bags; encourages urban farming; plans to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions 20 percent by 2012; and even has an urban-forests plan to promote preservation and planting of trees.

Tucson: This fast-growing urban area in the Sonoran Desert imposes restrictions on landscaping to conserve water, and is a leader in developing systems that bring reclaimed water (treated effluent) to golf courses, parks and other outdoor facilities.

Boulder: Famous for adopting stringent urban growth restrictions three decades ago, this foothills neighbor of Denver has set a goal of achieving zero waste, and is promoting recycling, composting and waste-reduction programs of all sorts to meet this high objective.

Austin: The Texas state capital plans to be the nation’s most energy-efficient city by 2015, and is focusing on wind power, biodiesel production and stringent new-home efficiency standards to meet that goal. —E.L

end, probably in the form of wind-blown seeds, several centuries ago, and the tree line has been moving steadily south about two miles a generation in what is nearly a rain-forest climate, with 75 inches of precipitation annually.

It's no surprise that the island is distinct culturally, as well. The island economy depends almost entirely on fisheries, tourism and America's largest Coast Guard base—when you see news stories about daring rescues in the Gulf of Alaska, the Coast Guard boats, planes and helicopters have departed from Kodiak. There's also the Kodiak Launch Complex 44 miles southwest of town at Narrow Cape. It's a full-service rocket-launch facility owned and operated by Alaska Aerospace Corporation, which is owned by the state. Fourteen rockets have been launched in its 11-year history, and two more launches are scheduled for this year. "The complex is becoming a key facility ensuring our nation's access to space," according to CEO Dale Nash. And surrounding the space

facility is the Burton Ranch buffalo herd, where visitors can enjoy the unique sight of North American bison grazing beside a rocket launchpad.

Darron Scott arrived in this colorful locale from central Texas 10 years ago to take the helm of the Kodiak Electric Association cooperative, and immediately resolved to lessen the island's longstanding reliance on diesel electric generation. Accustomed to incessant wrangling over virtually any power-generation proposal in the Lower 48, Scott was stunned as the island set about adding its three wind turbines at a cost of \$21.4 million: There was no opposition; there were no contentious town meetings to debate the idea. The three turbines entered service last year, and in the first quarter of 2010, the Pillar Mountain Wind Project generated about 9 percent of the island's power, 3,525 megawatt-hours. That saved more than 500,000 gallons of diesel fuel; at \$2 a gallon for diesel, the project's pay-

back would be well under 10 years.

"These days, when people talk to me about Pillar Mountain, most of the time they ask how soon we can get the next three turbines up," Scott says, still amazed at the project's universal acceptance. "You'll often hear me say: 'Diesel is not our future.' Islanders say, 'Right on.' Discussions at our board meetings center on how we can use electric cars, electric heat pumps and other such technologies to make Kodiak a hydrocarbon-free place."

Self-sufficiency, several members of Sustainable Kodiak explain, is in the island's blood.

"This is a hands-on kind of place," says Theresa Peterson, a longtime resident and Kodiak fisher who for six years has relied on solar power rather than diesel generation for the three months each summer that she is at her remote fishing camp at the south end of the island. "And believe me, solar power is not only more efficient, it sure saves a lot of time and effort hauling cans of diesel up the beach to the cabin."

Peterson brings vegetable starts down to her summer camp to grow her own fresh produce. Like many islanders, she plants potatoes at home in large black fish containers—halibut tubs. She covers the tubers with seaweed and harvests in September when she returns from fish camp.

Peterson has installed conservation devices in her “town” home, curbed her electricity consumption habits and cut her home electricity use in half. She freezes 200 pounds of fish each summer and relies on it all winter.

Chris Lynch, a Kodiak shop owner, civil engineer, member of the borough assembly and president of the board of local recycling agency Threshold Services Inc., estimates 50 percent of island residents recycle. That’s far from ideal, but it’s a fairly high number for a remote community, and it reflects the concerns about the Kodiak landfill, which is expected to exhaust its useful life in 2014.

As a result, the city is debating removal of the dumpsters it has long provided for public use. Though it’s difficult to find markets for unsorted recyclables, as urban areas in the Lower 48 do, Lynch and others are trying to establish a coastal Alaska recycling cooperative that can help send recyclables down to markets in the Lower 48.

Other residents choosing to embrace sustainable self-sufficiency include Brigid and Harry Dodge, owners and operators of a bear-viewing lodge in Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge (which comprises 80 percent of the island), who say they’re trying to keep their lodge’s carbon footprint at a minimum. Three solar panels at the lodge supply all electricity, and composting toilets produce no effluent.

At the Kodiak harbor, port officials last year installed the second-largest hydraulic boat lift in the United States, enabling local boat owners to undertake maintenance and repair work that previously required a trip to the Lower 48, more than 1,000 ocean miles south. “Over time, that will save millions of gallons of diesel now that fishing vessels no longer need to go south for haulout,” says harbormaster Marty Owen.

Up the road from town (there is less than 100 miles of road on the island), a specialized fish hatchery is supporting an artificially created sockeye salmon run. Each year up to 6 million fry are raised in the hatchery, then planted in previously barren Spiridon Lake, from which they swim downstream to the ocean to support the island's fishing industry.

"We're giving nature a boost that helps to sustain a local industry," says Tina Fairbanks of the Kodiak Regional Aquaculture Association. Fisheries managers may use such techniques in the future to help restore a local Chinook run that is collapsing.

Island residents are highly concerned about the effects of climate change on the Pacific, and most islanders have at least heard of ocean acidification, an effect of carbon dioxide increasing in the atmosphere, which one federal official says may in the long run be even more significant than global warming.

"Trying to understand fisheries popula-

tions is one of the most complex things scientists can attempt," says Bob Foy, manager of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Kodiak Fisheries Research Center. "Most places on earth, overfishing has been the cause of fisheries' decline. Not here. Kodiak is the front line in studying ocean acidification."

"PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT SUBSISTENCE is more than food," wrote Denise May in the *Kodiak Daily Mirror* in 2002. "It's a way of life. It's being who you are."

May was a Native Alaskan writing about subsistence hunting and gathering, but she might as well have been describing Kodiak's newfound determination to meld subsistence, self-sufficiency and sustainability into a distinctive whole that islanders hope will serve as an example. Many other communities are adopting sustainable measures, but Kodiak is unique.

At Java Flats coffee shop, south of town on the road to Narrow Cape, Dake Schmidt is explaining island sentiment.

We're having lunch, served on a dinnerware collection in which no two pieces are alike, though there is a color theme, blue and white. "Customers give them to us," the server explains, describing a home-grown recycling program that has become one of the cafe's distinguishing characteristics. Schmidt laughs.

"All this is Kodiak's unique, eclectic campaign for sustainability," Schmidt explains. "This could be the best place on earth to sort all this out. We're happy to become lab rats. We'll try this, try that, try the other, and see how well it all works." ▲

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GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines serves Kodiak Island daily. Book your flight at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.