KENAI MOUNTAINS-TURNAGAIN ARM
NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

2023
ANNUAL REPORT



REFLECTING ON 2023 WITH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, RACHEL BLAKESLEE

2023 was a landmark year for the Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area—one defined by resilience, partnership, and a historic victory that secured our future.

On January 5th, President Biden signed the National Heritage Area Act into law, reauthorizing KMTA for another 15 years. This achievement was the result of years of tireless advocacy and grassroots organizing. When every traditional legislative path closed, we pulled together as a community and did the impossible—pushing our bill through Congress as a standalone measure. The Senate passed it unanimously. The House followed with an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 326–95. This wasn't just a win for KMTA—it was a powerful validation of the work that National Heritage Areas do across the country. Every vote we received was for us alone.

That momentum carried through the year. We brought more than 340 students into the field through hands-on outdoor education programs, from snow science explorations to coastal ecology adventures. We awarded over $149,000 in grants to community-led projects that steward the natural, cultural, and historic resources of this incredible region. And we hosted events that inspired connection, celebrated local heritage, and sparked pride of place—from family ski races and trail challenges to storytelling nights and a one-of-a-kind glacier run.

Each number in this report represents something bigger: a student who felt the spark of stewardship, a community project brought to life, a moment of joy and connection outdoors. These are the building blocks of a stronger, more resilient Heritage Area.

Thank you for standing with us during this pivotal year. We're deeply proud of what we accomplished together—and energized for the next 15 years of impact to come.

With gratitude,

Rachel Blakeslee, Executive Director



AT A GLANCE

2023 KEY METRICS



EDUCATION

67
No. of program days

343
No. of participants

FINANCIALS

$447k
Generated in-kind

$585k
Cash revenue





EVENTS

467+
Event participants

7
Events in the NHA

EDUCATION

MEET OUR PROGRAMS

OVERVIEW

KMTA education programs offer diverse opportunities for local youth to connect directly with the epic landscapes and distinct cultural heritage of our region, including:

OUTDOOR SCHOOL

This immersive overnight outdoor education program serves 5th graders in Southcentral Alaska and is held at the Begich, Boggs Visitor Center in Portage Valley. Many federal, state, and local partners are engaged to bring this one-of-a-kind program to life!

SNOWSCHOOL

K-12 winter field trips that invite students to explore the winter environments and recreation opportunities of the KMTA NHA. Students strap on snowshoes and set out for a day of outdoor adventure and scientific exploration of the snowpack and winterized watersheds.

FRESH AIR FRIDAYS

Educational adventures in the KMTA NHA on school breaks and in-service days that build community, foster pride of place, and support families with safe and supervised fun for their kids.

COASTAL CONNECTIONS

Week-long summer program for middle school students in Seward that nurtures their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs while giving them opportunities to explore and learn about their local coastal environments.

EDUCATION

MEASURING OUR IMPACT

OVERVIEW

KMTA education programs offer diverse opportunities for local youth to connect directly with the epic landscapes and distinct cultural heritage of our region, including:

	Outdoor School	SnowSchool	Fresh Air Fridays	Coastal Connections
No. of program days	30	22	5	10
No. of participants	156	123	40	24
Areas served	Anchorage, Seward	Whittier, Seward, Hope, Moose Pass, Cooper Landing	Seward, Hope, Moose Pass, Girdwood	Seward









FUNDRAISING

SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

OVERVIEW

KMTA supports community projects that steward the natural, cultural, and historic resources of this nationally important landscape. These projects help to preserve, promote and facilitate public enjoyment of these resources.

$149.1k
Amount awarded by KMTA

$344.2k
Amount of match donations generated

20
No. of projects supported

FOCUS AREAS

Projects include trail work, historic building restoration, outdoor youth recreation, and more. The number of projects per focus area include:

6
Historic & cultural preservation

8
Trails & recreation

6
Education & interpretation

EVENTS

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

OVERVIEW

Our events connect people to the trails and places that make this region unique. Through recreation and community building, we help people experience the joy of being in nature and immersed in some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country.

TRAIL CHALLENGE

The trail challenge sees competitors hiking trails within the National Heritage Area, embracing local businesses, fostering stewardship, and empowering outdoor education by helping KMTA meet its fundraising goal. Competitors track their mileage and elevation gained during the challenge to win prizes and bragging rights.





MINESHAFT GRINDER

KMTA celebrates the mining history in Hope, AK by encouraging racers up Palmer Creek Road in the Mineshaft Grinder. The Mineshaft Grinder offers three race options: Gold Grinder -- 11-mile, uphill bike race; Silver Grinder -- half-marathon footrace; Quartz Grinder -- 8.8-mile foot race.

CORDUROY CRUSH

Co-hosted by KMTA and the Girdwood Nordic Ski Club, the Corduroy Crush is a series of family-friendly ski races. This event is a celebration of the joy of Nordic skiing and the region's rich history within the sport, which is highlighted on interpretive signs along the 5k Nordic Loop and surrounding area.



EVENTS

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

OVERVIEW

Our events are inclusive and welcoming, bringing together participants of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to experience all that this region has to offer.



SPENCER DASH

This one-of-a-kind race highlights the beauty of Spencer Glacier and the history of the Alaska Railroad as runners retrace the glacier's recession over the last 100 years. The Alaska Railroad is an important part of Alaska's and KMTA's cultural heritage, allowing athletes to connect with that history as they travel to this event.

PHOTO CONTEST

The annual KMTA Photo Contest allows participants to showcase the National Heritage Area through their eyes. All photographs must be taken in one of the KMTA communities or the wilderness in between them, highlighting the diverse wonders within the area.





TRAIL TALES

Partnering with Alaska Trails, KMTA co-hosted 2023 Trail Tales, an event that saw seven storytellers sharing short stories about their trail experiences, adventures, and life lessons learned. This event drew a crowd of over 100 attendees, making it one of the best-attended KMTA events to date.