



Harding Ice Cap Camp

“The Top of the World”

In the spring of 1970, The Fish House News advertised round trip tickets from Seward to the Harding “Ice Cap” for \$15.00 per person. Jackie and Joe Stanton, owners of Harbor Air, and Jim Arness of Nikiski partnered to provide this unique sightseeing experience. Ten Ski-Dos and three Ski-Boose awaited visitors on top of the ice field where they could be rented for \$7.00 an hour.

“The emergency hut is well stocked and furnished at this time and will take care of as many as 20 people ‘cosily.’ There is a cooking stove as well as a heating stove (FHN 1970).”

The camp consisted of a 10’ x 18’ emergency hut constructed of corrugated plastic mounted on skids and an outhouse. The camp operator and mechanic, Arland Zimmerman, and his son Gary, remained on site during much of the summer and welcomed visitors with winter boots as they stepped off the plane. Visitors typically spent two hours on site where activities included snowmachining, skiing, and snowshoeing.



Harding Ice Cap warming hut and Ski-Doo line-up, 1970. Photograph courtesy of Seward Community Library Association.

Operational Setback...

In 1966, the Harding Icefield was included in the “land freeze” imposed by Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall. This action halted conveyances of public lands to the State of Alaska until Alaska Native Land Claims were resolved. An operational setback occurred when it was realized that the camp was located on land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and a Special Use Permit was required. The BLM filed a trespass injunction against the operation as a consequence. Arness was ordered to vacate by November 1970. The partners were unable to remove the warming hut and other camp equipment, possibly due to inclement weather. The two year old business operation closed during the fall of 1970.

“I realize that the ‘land freeze’ contains certain stipulation that requires you issue the trespassing injunction. . . (RB to VS 1970).”



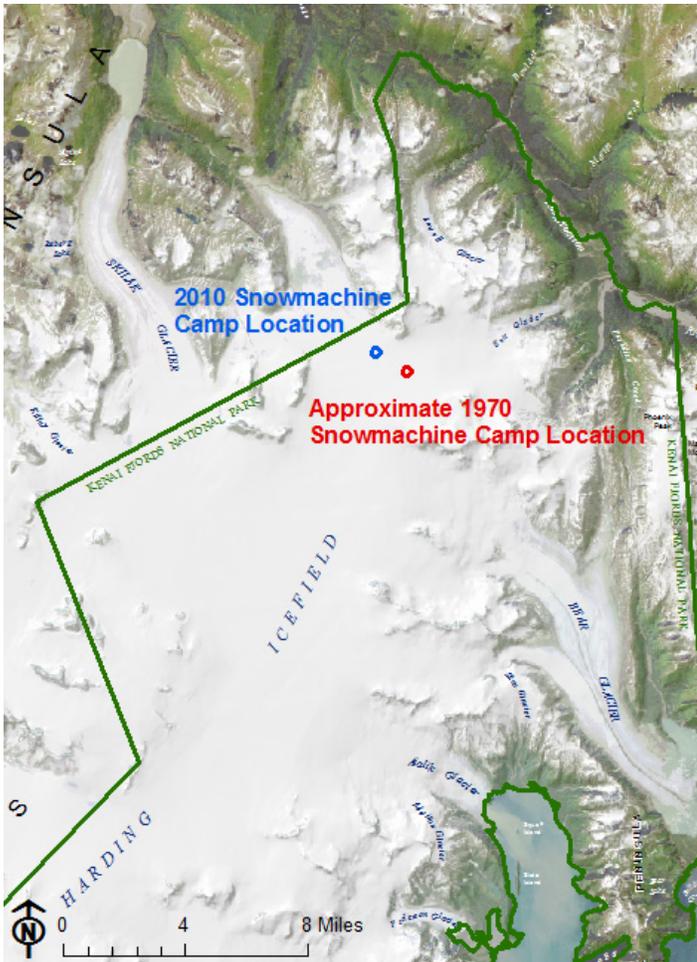
Snowmachine Camp on Harding Ice Cap, 1970. Photograph courtesy of Seward Community Library Association.

What Happened to the Camp?

Despite the failure of the Harding Ice Cap operation, recreational snowmachine use on the icefield continues. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, which established Kenai Fjords National Park, included language that states "...the Secretary is authorized to develop access to the Harding Icefield and to allow use of mechanized equipment on the icefield for recreation."

“At the end of the summer an attempt was made to drive the snowmachines off the icefield, but this was not successful; the machines were eventually helicoptered down (Memo 1970).”

The camp disappeared during the 1971 winter and was not seen for nearly 40 years, although the warming hut and camp equipment remained encapsulated in snow and ice. In 2009, seasonal melt unveiled the remains. Subsequent visits to the site revealed the camp to be a pile of twisted lumber, fiberglass siding, equipment, barrels and miscellaneous debris distributed over a distance of nearly 300 feet.



Original (1970) and current location of the snowmachine camp on the Harding Icefield.

The site was documented and location data were gathered. The camp position has moved due to ice flow and is currently located less than a mile from the Kenai Fjords National Park – Kenai National Wildlife Refuge boundary; moving northwest at a rate of approximately 70 feet/year (21 m/yr).



Remains of warming hut melting out of the Harding Icefield in September 2009.

Quick Facts

Pilot Joe Stanton, owner of Harbor Air Service, initially made icefield landings on floats coated with plastic. During the 1970 season a wheel ski plane was used.

Flying time between Seward and the Ice Cap Camp was 10 minutes.

In 1970, 200-300 people flew to the icefield.

The average stay was two hours.

Seward Chamber of Commerce held its weekly meeting on the icefield on June 2, 1970.

References:

Fish House News (FHN) 6/5/1970

Memo to KEFJ Superintendent, KEFJ 1579 (Memo) 11/29/1982

Red Boucher letter to Vern Stahl, BLM (RB to VS) 7/22/1970

Program Contact: Shannon Kovac
P.O. Box 1727 Seward, AK 99664
(907) 422-0541
Shannon_Kovac@nps.gov

