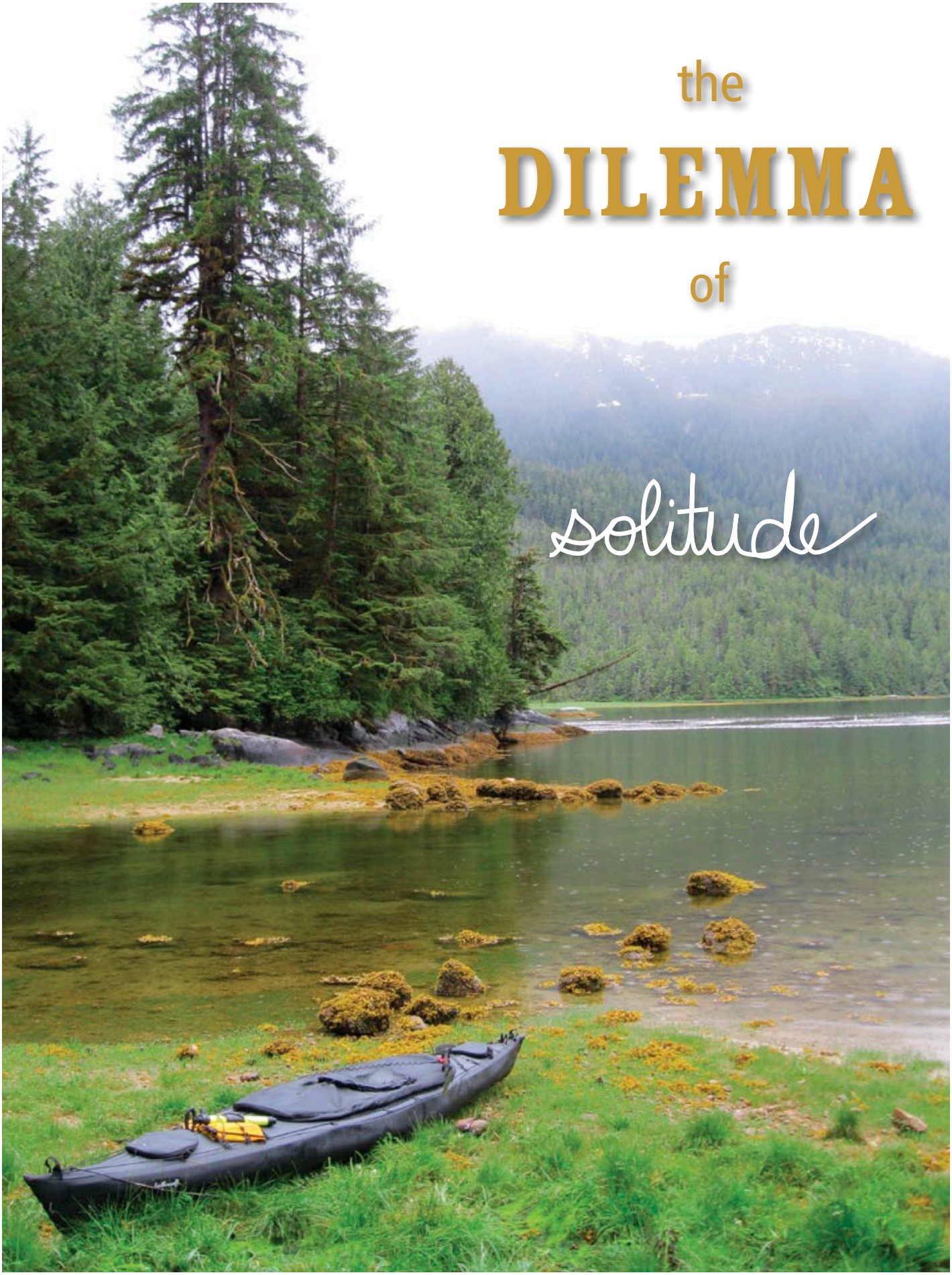
the DILEMMA of solitude



STORY AND PHOTOS BY **ALEX SIDLES**

They say inspiration strikes when you least expect it. That's certainly what happened to me. On a Sunday afternoon in 2009, I was leisurely poring over the online archives of this magazine looking for an entertaining kayak read, when I stumbled across Keith Webb's story about a man in British Columbia called Kayak Bill.* Webb's article immediately captured my interest and Bill soon captured my fascination. Bill had forged a life for himself alone in his kayak among the small rocky islands of the BC coast. There, he lived for decades on his own terms, dependent only on his own wits for survival. I was dumbfounded at the adventurousness and integrity of his life; with no support network, he lived a life of exposure to risk and the only rules that he had to adhere to were the ones he made for himself. I began to think of him as a hero.

At the time I read Webb's article, I was fantasizing about a kayak adventure of my own: a six-month paddle up the Inside Passage. Kayak Bill's life became my inspiration for the trip; I'd avoid sections of the passage with boat traffic, I'd camp on islands for days at a time and explore them on foot, and I'd change my route to visit some of his hideaways mentioned in the article. I wanted to see with my own eyes those faraway places Webb wrote about—Eden Island, Goose, Ivory and Aristazabal. I wouldn't hunt or forage like Bill, but I'd keep lists of the animals and birds I encountered. I would taste that same clean, crisp air and hear the wind rush through those same evergreens. Most of all, I would be alone.

The solitude was the most important part. In the winter of 2010, I was fresh from the U.S. Marine Corps. I'd made staff sergeant in seven years with four deployments to Iraq and one to Afghanistan.

I'd loved the Corps. The sense of adventure, purpose and accomplishment in everything we did filled me with satisfaction for the first five years of my service. But as time went on I took on more responsibilities, most of which centered around other Marines rather than myself. By the time my second contract expired, I was a platoon sergeant who spent most of his time fussing over other people's assignments and requirements instead of working through things by myself. When the time came to get out, I jumped at it with no regrets: none for my years in service, but none for my decision to leave. What I wanted now was to be alone in a place where I could be in sole command of my destiny for the first time in years. I chose the Inside Passage; any problems that arose during the trip would be mine to solve and any triumphs, mine to treasure. It would be six months of solitude, all in the spirit of Kayak Bill.

In early April 2011, I finally slid my folding kayak into the cold, choppy waters of Bowman Bay near Anacortes, Washington. I was now paddling in the wake of my hero, but for the first two weeks the trip was not very "Kayak Bill" at all. The only campsites through the San Juan and Gulf Islands were in designated parks; there were sailing yachts everywhere and the noise of boat engines was inescapable. There were the usual joys of civilized life: a wonderful couple in Cedar on Vancouver Island generously took me into their home, yachties in the islands shared their meals with me, I made friends at the hostel in Powell River and I enjoyed the peace of mind that comes from knowing emergency assistance is always close by. But this was supposed to be a wilderness trip; civilization and company weren't what I had come for.

The true wilderness began at Desolation Sound north of the Strait of Georgia. Here I began to see bears and killer whales, endless stands of unlogged trees and island after island free of houses and roads. Designated campsites and the company of yachts became a distant memory as the trip finally started to reflect the spirit of Kayak Bill. By now I was going a week at a time between conversations with other people. While there were still boats around, I began to feel truly alone. No one lived here. I, myself was only a brief trespasser in the natural world. My footprint on the earth was as light as Kayak Bill's had been, and, as he did, I faced each day with no one to answer to and no one to answer to me.

As planned, I took my time, choosing a circuitous route in order to see the most beautiful places, and spending a day or two at especially nice campsites. My favorites were always shell or sand beaches. I would lean against the driftwood and read books from my Kindle, or try to spot and identify shorebirds on their migration north for the summer. Flocks of snow geese flew overhead in ragged V-shaped formations, calling to one another and always heading northwest like I was. Mew gulls called back and forth with their odd, high-pitched screams. On calm days, I could hear Dall's and harbor porpoises or sea lions puff-puff-puffing from across the water. From time to time I encountered fish farms—ugly reminders of civilization—and I would always continue past, even if it meant a longer paddling day than I'd originally intended. Kayak Bill would never have camped within sight or hearing of a fish farm and I was determined to live by his values.

Following the path of Kayak Bill, I detoured away from the thread on the map that delineates the Inside Passage and paddled into the Broughton Archipelago.

**We introduced our readers to "Kayak" Bill Davidson in our October 2005 issue. In the article "Looking for Kayak Bill," author Neil Frazer had chanced upon one of Kayak Bill's camps in 1992 while paddling the British Columbia coast. Neil took an interest in Bill's life and had hoped to meet him at one of his island haunts, but Bill died in 2004. Bill had been living alone on the islands along the Inside Passage since 1975 and traveled by kayak. He was a talented artist and occasionally sold watercolor paintings to earn what little cash he needed for supplies. Bill met and paddled with Lori Anderson in 1980, and together they had a child. After his years with Lori and his son, Bill returned to his solo life.*

Keith Webb revisited the story in a special Sea Kayaker *online feature story, "Kayak Bill—A Requiem" (www.seakayakermag.com/2005/Oct05/KayakBillReq.htm). Keith had met Bill in 1968 when they shared an interest in rock climbing. In 1980, Keith, like Neil, took an interest in Bill's solitary life and tracked down a number of his campsites. Keith's writing inspired Alex Sidles to follow in Kayak Bill's wake.*

-Ed.

This grassy campsite in Lowe Inlet, Grenville Channel, was covered with bear droppings.

Not only is it one of the world's most beautiful kayaking destinations, it is also home to Eden Island, the first of the Kayak Bill bases Webb described. The islands I was seeing, so beautiful and pure, were the same that had seized his imagination all those decades ago. Much must have changed since his years here, but to me, seeing this territory for the first time, it was every bit the wilderness I had imagined. With the constant swoosh of wind and the growl of waves breaking on shore, I was alone in the deep green woods and on the lonely beaches of the remote Broughton Archipelago.

I'd been having difficulty finding campsites in the Broughtons, but I spotted a tiny south-facing shell beach one day and decided to explore it to see if it would remain dry at high tide. I'd read all the Inside Passage trip accounts I could get my hands on and was aware how easily the tides could sneak up on a tent at night, even with rigorous inspection of tidelines. Using what I thought was an animal trail, I walked just a few feet into the trees and in a small clearing saw a wooden tripod about six feet high, made of branches and driftwood and lashed together with fragments of rope that had likely been washed up on the beach. An array of stones below the tripod formed the base for a combination fireplace-oven-stove, and a heap of empty seashells next to the firepit revealed what the architect of this camp kitchen had been cooking. I was frozen in my tracks, at first by the fear I was trespassing into someone's private domain, and then by the realization that what I was seeing might actually be relics left behind by Kayak Bill.

In keeping with the others who have written about Bill, I will not name the specific island where this campsite was. I will say only that the island was within a day's paddle from Eden, and was part of the Gilford Provincial Forest.

At first, I didn't believe that any of Kayak Bill's artifacts could have survived all these years, but these did not look like an ordinary weekend camp or native cultural site. I'd encountered several of those already on the trip, and they always had a more sprawling, chewed-up feel to them. Here the cooking tripod was neat and compact: it took up no more space than it needed and the empty seashells were all neatly piled next to it; not one had been carelessly tossed to the side. There were no beer bottles, cigarette butts or wrappers anywhere. Nearby on the beach, I found a bench made from a plank and more lengths of rope. Whoever had built the tripod and bench had been extraordinarily careful and had taken a terrific amount of time setting this site up to be comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. Thinking back to Webb's descriptions of other Kayak Bill sites, with their attention to detail and tidy shell middens, I dearly want to believe this forest home was the handiwork of Kayak Bill—perhaps a foraging camp near his early main camp on Eden.

It was a thrilling moment. I set up my tent in the clearing near the tripod and spent the afternoon sitting on Bill's bench on Bill's island, eating dinner with the same gorgeous views of the cluster of Broughton's islets Bill had enjoyed. The water in the channels was clear and still, the air clean and crisp, the forest itself deep green and humid. I was careful to leave not the slightest bit of trash behind that could defile the site. It was, for me, sacred ground.

Uplifted by this discovery, I set out for the next leg of the trip through Queen Charlotte Strait and up the coast to the Hakai Protected Area. This was true Kayak Bill country: a land of pounding surf and mirror-like bays. Here, unlike in other

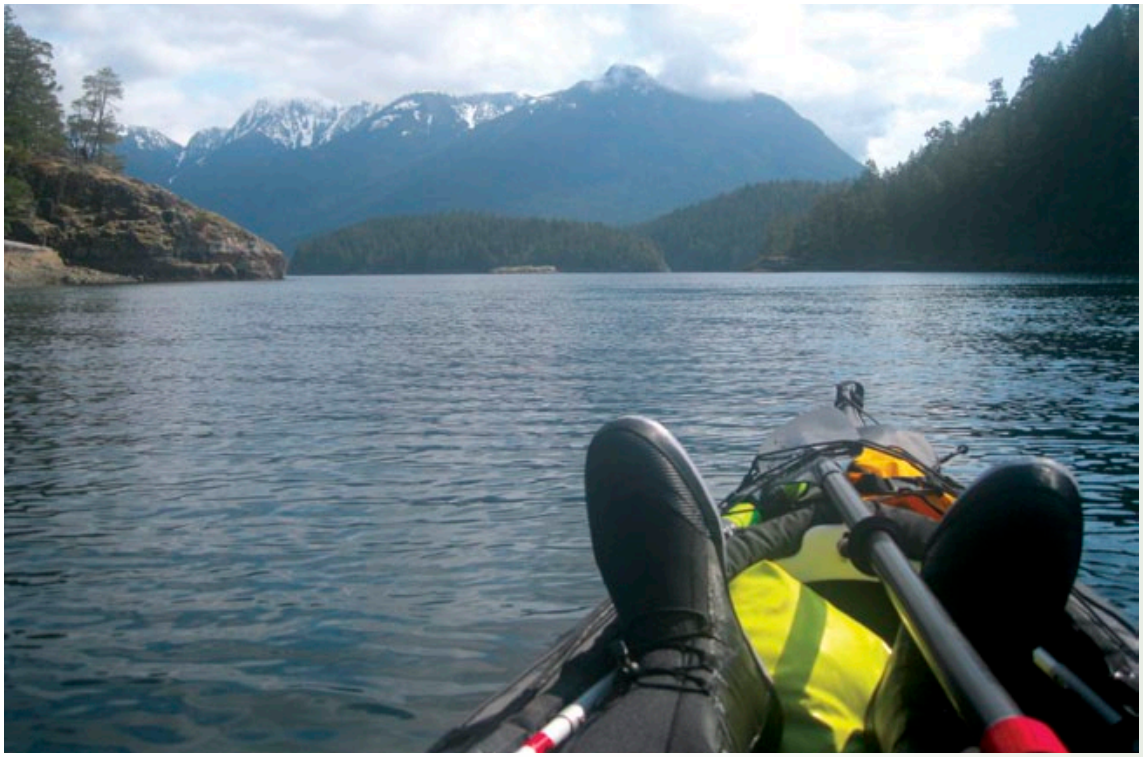
The remains of Kayak Bill's cooking tripod and the discarded shells of clams.

parts of North America, I was more afraid of bears than they were of me. On one island I staged a yelling, rock-throwing threat display in an attempt to drive two black bears off a beach forty yards from where I was camping, only to be completely ignored. I saw my first-ever wolf in the wild and shared the water with whole clans of sea otters. When the wind carried the fishy odor of sea lion rookeries, I would swing wide to avoid antagonizing the aggressive and territorial males.

As I passed Goose Island, another site in Webb's article, I felt fully immersed in the spirit of Kayak Bill. The joys of the trip were now wilderness joys: pleasure at sunny afternoons on which to dry clothes, the feeling of satisfaction at perfectly gauging the tidal currents to catch a boost through a twisting maze of channels, the triumph of using the topographic map to guess correctly where I might find a sandy beach at the end of the day. I was the master of my fate. Nature could throw me curveballs in the form of bad weather or long, exposed crossings, but I could always devise some means to mitigate the bad and maximize the good. I was living the dream; this total self-dependence was what I had come out here for.

By now, two months into the trip, I was going up to two weeks at a time with no human interaction. My world was the world of Kayak Bill: trees, rocks, clouds and water. I felt perfectly happy and at home. Earlier in the trip I had hurried to reach towns in order to more quickly get to the cheeseburgers, beer, showers and laundry, but in the Hakai I deliberately delayed my progress toward the next stop, Shearwater on Denny Island. Everything I needed was in my boat and

Christopher Hoyt



The waters were calm in Waddington Channel, between East and West Redonda Islands, Desolation Sound.

in my mind; town would only detract from the solitary spirit of Kayak Bill.

Eventually I pulled into Shearwater to restock food. It was here, in this cannery-and-shipyard town of sixty permanent inhabitants, that I was thrown an unexpected curve. Her name was Erica*, and she worked at the Fisherman's Bar and Grill. Or, as everyone called it, The Bar, because there was only one. Not only was she beautiful, but she was the first woman I'd talked to in a month. She was off shift and sitting next to me. Over a delicious, frosty beer, I told her about my trip and some of my adventures. I shied away from talking about things like "the spirit of Kayak Bill." Such things aren't easy to explain to other people, and with my stinking clothes and by-now atrophied social skills, I was worried I already appeared pretty far out on the crazy scale. Luckily, Erica's own drink kept her from noticing and before I knew it she had invited me to a wedding in Shearwater the next day. She was to be a bridesmaid at the ceremony and needed a date. Spirit of Kayak Bill or not, I was thrilled. I attended the wedding in an Army surplus rain jacket and sopping-wet sneakers—my best clothes. Erica was in a red dress. In spite of our mismatched outfits, we danced at the reception in front of everyone like a princess with a peasant, but loving every minute of it.

On the fourth day of my intended one-day stopover, I checked out of the hotel and moved into Erica's place. I had fallen in love with her, quickly and deeply—something that had not happened to me in eight years. She introduced me to her friends on the island, a small but lively crowd of shipyard workers, government employees and fishermen. Life in Shearwater revolved around parties, and with her energetic and outgoing personality, Erica was always at the center of them.

We did all the usual new-couple things: we stayed up till dawn talking, we made plans and dreams for the future, we shared inside jokes, we hung out doing nothing at all but enjoying each other's company and being in love. She took me skinny-dipping for the first time in my adult life; we attended half a dozen barbecues and parties. After a week, people in town were asking when I'd get a job in Shearwater. After two weeks, they were asking when I'd get a house.

Erica and I talked about the possibility of her kayaking to Alaska with me. We each wanted the other in our life, but Erica was soon leaving Shearwater for a job on the mainland and I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life paddling the Inside Passage. Erica asked if it was all right if she did not come to the dock to see me off, since it would be too sad for her. I was glad she'd asked, because it would have been too sad for me, too. We said goodbye at her house on our last night together and I got on the water at dawn the next morning.

I was only on the water for a couple hours, paddling with a favorable tide through the Seaforth Channel west of Shearwater, when a couple of young guys from town, friends of Erica's, ran into me on the water. They talked me into leaving my boat at an abandoned dock in a remote inlet and returning with them to town to see her again. They told me she missed me, and I certainly missed her too. I walked into The Bar where she was working and when she looked up and saw me, she began laughing and crying at the same time.

Three days later, when I finally left for good, it was my turn to cry. The boys dropped me off back at the dock where I'd stashed my kayak and they sped out of the inlet to go fishing. I sat on the planks as the sound of their engine receded. Alone in the wilderness: exactly as I had planned, exactly as I had paddled so far to be and exactly as I'd been—and happily so. But it was different now, horribly so; all I could think of was Erica. I couldn't look forward with a sense of adventure, only back at what I was leaving behind. The solitude of the wilderness, previously so pleasurable to me, so filled with wonder and beauty, now felt like emptiness. Filled with regret and longing, I began to sob. The sound of my own crying echoed back to me from the narrow walls of the inlet. This made me embarrassed, even with no one else around to hear, so I shut myself up. All I wanted to do was get in my boat and paddle southeast to be with Erica again. It took a deliberate and

*Name has been changed to protect privacy

prolonged act of discipline to turn the bow northwest and paddle away.

For days afterward, as I crawled my way through Milbanke Sound and the adverse currents of Higgins Passage, I felt lonely and depressed. My sense of loss at turning my back on that time with Erica drowned out any enjoyment of the natural world that had previously given me so much delight. The joys of the wild Inside Passage now seemed inconsequential and false compared with the joys of her company.

Two days after leaving Shearwater, I passed Ivory Island, another of Kayak Bill's haunts. I hadn't thought about Bill even once after meeting Erica, but seeing Ivory brought him back to mind. I was reminded of the happiness I had felt during the past three months alone in the wilderness, but now everything felt different. The world of trees, rocks, clouds and water was entirely the same, but I didn't feel the same way about it. With Erica missing, so was the joy I'd found in the wilderness.

I began to think about Bill in that context. What must his life have been like, out here all alone *forever*? Was he happy? Was he aware of how much he was missing? In 1980, after five years of wandering alone by kayak, Bill invited a woman to join him in his life and in his travels. The following year she gave birth to their son. His years with his family eventually came to an end and he had returned to the wild again, alone. With Erica I had gone from feeling entirely satisfied by this land to feeling like there was a great hollow space at the very heart of it. Had Bill lived with this gaping hole for decades? How was it possible for a man to embrace this solitude in the face of love?

I realized that, for me, it was not possible to choose an empty wilderness over a life of love. With that realization, my mental image of Bill began to change. At the center of what I had seen as his great adventure, there was this missing part. I had admired him for living in the wild of the Inside Passage entirely on his own terms. Now I felt sorry for him. He'd had no one to share this magnificent wilderness with him, and I now knew that without that sharing, the experience could never be as rich.

On the west side of Higgins Passage, Aristazabal Island hove into view. This was the last of the Kayak Bill sites on my route and was quite close to his main camp. When I was still planning the trip, I had thought that reaching Aristazabal, even more so than the Broughtons and Hakai, would be a defining moment in my pursuit of the spirit of Kayak Bill. But now I saw the land with new eyes. Aristazabal appeared to me a dark, hulking mass on the horizon, blocking out the view of the sunset. The island was distant and shrouded in thick fog and clouds. It looked bleak and desolate, like loneliness made physically manifest. I no longer fantasized about how I would have handled myself if I'd been in Bill's shoes during his adventures. Erica had displaced all such thoughts from my mind. I could still feel the call of solitude and the mysterious, but it had ceased its hold on me.

I never went to Aristazabal Island. In fact, by the time I passed the west side of Princess Royal Island, I had already decided to cut the trip short. Rather than push all the way north to Haines, I stopped at Ketchikan. I felt I had accomplished everything I had set out to do. I had wanted to do this trip in the spirit of Kayak Bill and I *had* found the spirit of Kayak Bill. More than that, though, I had found the spirit of Kayak Bill wanting. All the joy of the wilderness that he must have felt, it's all real. It's a powerful, strong joy to be living alone in the woods. But it isn't enough—not for me, at least. I could never live like Kayak Bill. There was a part of me that used to think I could have, always on my own terms, answerable only to myself. But in the end, meeting Erica made me realize just how heavy the cost of a life like Bill's would be. I would be buried under that weight. It would have crushed me. I can only surmise that to Bill, the cost of a life alone was not as high as it was for me; or worse, that the joys of a life shared were not as great. Either notion fills me with pity for him.

I still look up to Kayak Bill but I realize now that he is a tragic figure, not a role model. He is someone to be respected but not emulated. Despite the very real and deep pleasures of solo wilderness life, whatever satisfaction he found out there alone on the islands of British Columbia must have been incomplete. I think Christopher McCandless of *Into the Wild* came closer to the truth when he wrote this truncated note in his diary near the end of his life: "Happiness only real when shared." **SK**

Alex Sidles is a Seattle-based paddler who took up sea kayaking in 2007. He kayaks mostly in Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands. A former Marine with five deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, he currently co-directs the Habele Outer Island Education Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides scholarships to primary and secondary school children in Micronesia, where he taught English for three years. This trip up the Inside Passage was his first.