

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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Drifting Towards the North Pole



The Fram, frozen in the ice in 1894.

On the 20th of September 1893, the *Fram* with Fridtjof Nansen and his crew of 12 and about two dozen sledge dogs were frozen into the ice north of the New Siberian Islands at latitude 78° 49'. If his ideas were correct, and with any luck, the ship with the crew and dogs would drift along with the Arctic ice, pass near the North Pole, and several years later, emerge near Greenland.

On the other hand, if Nansen was wrong or if any of a number of things didn't go as planned, they would all die. They didn't really have a lot of options once the ice froze around the ship's hull. But then Nansen had christened the ship *Fram*, which meant forward in Norwegian, and that was the only direction he planned on going.

The first several weeks were disheartening as the ship moved with the ice in a circular fashion, forwards and then backwards. After six weeks they were further from the pole than when they had begun. The lack of forward progress and boredom were hard on the men but Nansen did his best to keep them occupied with scientific observations and other tasks.

Finally, in January 1894, they began to move steadily northward and crossed the 80° latitude mark on 22 March. Nansen determined that at this rate it might take as long as five years to reach the pole. He and Hjalmar Johansen, an expert dog-driver, began to privately discuss the possibility of making a sledge journey to the pole if conditions didn't improve.

Unfortunately, Nansen had never driven a dog sledge before and his initial attempts were somewhere between humorous and embarrassing. But he persisted and before long his skills improved. He also made an important discovery, that men on cross country skis could keep up with the dogs and therefore didn't need to ride on the sledges. This allowed the sledges to carry more supplies.

A month later the *Fram* passed 81° north, which while encouraging, still only amounted to about a mile per day. The sledge expedition to the pole was announced to the crew with the intention to depart when the ship passed 83°. Sledges were built that would allow for travel over the rough ice terrain, and kayaks were also constructed for the time where they might have to enter the sea.

Nansen and Johansen intended to reach the pole, then make for Franz Josef Land and then on to Spitzbergen where they hoped to find a ship to back to Norway. There were lots of uncertainties but these guys were as well prepared as they could have been, and between them had a lot of Arctic experience. Unfortunately neither GPS nor cell phones had yet been invented, so they faced some formidable challenges just knowing where they were going to be.