

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

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Trying to Find Franz Josef Land

After turning away from the North Pole and heading south, Nansen and Johansen initially made good progress as they encountered areas of relatively smooth ice. Their enthusiasm was high until April 13, 1895, 7 days into their trek to Franz Josef Land, when both of their watches stopped.

This set the stage for potential disaster. Without knowing the time, they couldn't calculate the longitude correctly and, therefore, had no way to navigate accurately. Nansen made a guess of the time and they reset their watches, but they weren't at all certain of their true position. If they missed Franz Josef Land, it was probably all over for the twosome.

But as they progressed with the dogs across the ice, feeling considerable uncertainty about their future and ultimate destination, things started to brighten up a bit. Near the end of April, now six weeks after leaving the ship, they saw tracks of an Arctic fox, the first trace of another living creature beyond their dogs since they left the *Fram*. They soon noticed bear tracks, and then by the end of May, seals, gulls and whales in the occasional open water. At least they weren't going to starve to death.

At that point, by Nansen's calculations, they were only about 48 miles from the northernmost point of the Franz Josef Land islands. But the ice was starting to break up, making progress across the ice more difficult. Since late April they had been killing dogs at regular intervals to feed the others, and by the beginning of June only seven of the original 28 remained. On June 21, they left behind all of the supplies and equipment they felt they could do without in order travel as light as possible, living off the now plentiful supply of seals and birds.

The next day they decided to camp on a large ice flow, repair their gear, waterproof their kayaks and collect some strength for what they hoped would be the final stage of their expedition. A month later, on July 23, 1895, the day after leaving their camp, they saw land for the first time in almost two years. In his

journal Nansen wrote: “At last the marvel has come to pass-land, land, and after we had almost given up our belief in it”.

They survived a polar bear attack, and struggled across the last few miles of ice to get to an area of open area of water where they finally heard surf breaking. On August 6 they converted the kayaks into a catamaran, put up a sail and headed for the land they were so happy to finally see.

They soon observed that the land they had encountered was part of a larger group of islands. Moving southward in their kayaks, with the earlier map of Payer in hand, Nansen tentatively identified a headland as Cape Felder, which led them to believe they had in fact found Franz Josef Land. While they had hoped to find a hut and supplies further south left by an earlier expedition, loose ice and unfavorable winds made that impossible.

So with the Arctic winter closing in on them in late August, they decided to camp for the winter. In a sheltered cove, with rock and moss for building materials, they constructed a hut, which was to be their home for the next eight months. Their situation was uncomfortable, but not life threatening. There was plenty of wildlife around but their main enemy over the next eight months was to be boredom. They read and reread Nansen’s sailing almanac and navigation tables by the light of an oil lamp.