Touring the USCG Ice-Breaker Polar Sea

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Diana Gish/KMXT

The Coast Guard ice-breaker "Polar Sea" docked in Kodiak last week on its way to a scientific mission in the Bering Sea. The 399 foot-long vessel docked at Pier Two just ahead of the winter storm that hit Thursday night.

The Polar Sea's missions include scientific and logistical support for U.S. interests in both polar regions. Polar Sea is designed to move through six feet of ice at a speed of three knots. The Polar Sea and its sister ship Polar Star are the world's most powerful non-nuclear ice-breakers. The cutter routinely operates in the Bering Sea, Chukchi Sea, the Arctic Ocean, the Southern Ocean, and Antarctica.

From its home port in Seattle, the thirteen thousand, five hundred-ton cutter stopped in Kodiak to pick up the scientists who will conduct a study of the Bering Sea ecosystem from aboard the ship. The two-month-long operation is part of a six year study that's supported by the National Science Foundation and the North Pacific Research Board.

While awaiting the embarkment of the scientists, the Polar Sea was opened to Kodiak residents for tours.

The Polar Sea's public affairs officer is Lieutenant J.G. Emily Holt who escorted KMXT's Diana Gish onboard. Holt said that when she joined the Coast Guard, she didn't picture herself spending months at a time on a ship in the world's coldest places.

-- (POLARSEA "I wasn't sure ...sort of way.")

The main focus of the Polar Sea's current voyage is to examine the affects of changing ice conditions on the food web structure in the northern Bering Sea. The scientists will conduct their studies where the Bering Sea shifts from a fish-dominated system to an arctic animal habitat. Lead scientist Lee Cooper says that the changing ice conditions are, "likely to influence the potential expansion of Bering Sea fisheries further north while shrinking arctic habitat on the continental shelf."