Fairbanks, ALASKA-- In 1966, having just earned his master's degree in chemistry from Western Illinois University, Terry Whitledge knew he didn't want to end up working the rest of his life inside a chemical company. He wanted to work outside.

"I first thought of fisheries, and it was while looking at fisheries PhD programs that I saw a program called chemical oceanography," Whitledge said. "I thought I'd give that a try."

That chance encounter would send Whitledge on a 34-year adventure with the sea, to places like the Bering Sea, Mediterranean, South Pacific, Gulf of Mexico, and Arctic Ocean.

Recently, Whitledge was named director of the UAF Institute of Marine Science. IMS is a unit within the UAF School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. Although Whitledge has been interim director of IMS for eight months, his appointment became official last month.

"I've had some really great experiences," said Whitledge, professor of chemical oceanography at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. "I've been at sea and seen so many whales that I couldn't count them all. I've even traveled underneath the Arctic ice pack in a submarine. How many people could say that?"

Whitledge's extensive resume traces a career that began in 1972 when he graduated from the University of Washington with a PhD in oceanography. In the years since, Whitledge has led scientific exploration and understanding of the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. In 1997 he was among the first civilian scientists to conduct measurements of Arctic sea ice thickness from aboard a U.S. Navy submarine beneath the Arctic ice pack.

"Now that sounds like you're in a sardine can with 25 other guys," Whitledge said. "What was special was that there was a camera pointed up at the underside of the ice. You could see the composition of the ice, and look through the pools of water above the ice. And you could see the jellyfish. I listened to whales on the sonar. That trip totally dominates my perspective."
Whitledge joined UAF in 1998, following stints at Brookhaven National Laboratory, the University of Texas Marine Science Institute, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and the State University of New York. Until his appointment as IMS Director, Whitledge served as professor of marine science at SFOS, and held an affiliate faculty position at the UA International Arctic Research Center.

As director of the UAF Institute of Marine Science, Whitledge will oversee 20 academic and research faculty and 50 graduate students engaged in marine biology, biological, physical, chemical and geological oceanography throughout the sub-Arctic, Arctic, and Antarctic. IMS scientists secure about $5.5 million each year in research funding, with the majority coming from federal sources.

Whitledge replaces Mike Castellini, who served as IMS director until being promoted earlier this year to Associate Dean of the School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. Whitledge's appointment comes at a time of increasing state and national research needs and declining faculty numbers.

"Our critical mass is down. Fixing that is my priority," Whitledge said. "I am working to achieve some consensus to figure out what positions we want to hire and how many."

Whitledge said IMS would evolve in the next few years to meet state and national research priorities. He said IMS researchers and graduate students will become more involved in partnerships within the university, as well as with state and federal scientists studying the Bering Sea, Gulf of Alaska, and Arctic Ocean.

Bringing the nation's first university-based ice-capable research ship to UAF is also high on Whitledge's list. Whitledge has been instrumental in the design of the Alaska Region Research Vessel. He says federal funding for the $98 million ship is anticipated in 2006. Whitledge said he will also be involved in ongoing efforts to build a new land, sea and space-based Alaska Ocean Observing System.

"All of these tools will offer IMS scientists new ways to study the marine ecosystem," Whitledge said.

Despite the demands of his new job, Whitledge says he doesn't intend to stay tied to a desk. He'll continue his Bering Sea research and efforts to integrate U.S. and Russian marine research.

"I've been out on the Bering Sea every summer since 1975," Whitledge said. "Every time I go to sea, I learn something new. It gives me a realistic feeling for what the sea is all about and what is going on. I feel connected."

The UAF School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences conducts world-class marine and fisheries research, education and outreach across Alaska, the Arctic and Antarctic. More than 60 faculty scientists and 150 graduate students are engaged in building knowledge about Alaska and the world's coastal and marine ecosystems. SFOS is headquartered at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and serves the state from facilities located in Seward, Juneau, Anchorage and Kodiak.