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Ice Seal Committee Newsletter

Bearded and Ringed Seal ESA Listing

ESA Listing

In December 2012, NMFS listed three subspecies of ringed seals and two distinct populations of bearded seals, including those that occur in Alaska, as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Ladoga ringed seals, which occur in Lake Ladoga, Russia, were listed as endangered. Critical habitat areas have not yet been designated and NMFS has one year in order to make those designations. NMFS will solicit comments from the public on their critical habitat proposals.

Reason for Listing

The main reason for listing Alaskan ringed and bearded

seals as threatened is that these ice seals depend on ice and snow for survival. Climate models predict diminishing ice and snow cover through the current century which leads to conclusions that these changes will lead to population declines in the future and pose long-term threats to ice seals.

Effects on Subsistence

The ESA allows for subsistence harvest of listed species by Alaska Natives, so long as it is not done in a wasteful manner. Currently, the subsistence harvest of ice seals by Alaska Natives appears to be sustainable and does not pose a threat to the populations. Subsistence hunting may be regulated under the ESA, but only if the harvest is expressly found to “materially and

negatively” affect the species. NMFS would have to provide notice and hold an administrative hearing on the record for any such regulations. If ice seal populations declined to



Photo: J.C. George

Bearded seal basking on ice near Barrow

low levels, NMFS would work with the ISC to co-manage the harvests to ensure that sustainable subsistence harvest continues.

For more information check the links on the ISC’s webpage (www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife/Ice_Seal_Committee.php) or contact NOAA-NMFS biologist, Barbara Mahoney, at 907-271-3448 or visit the NMFS Alaska Region website at <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov>.



Photo by Kate Stafford

Ringed seal swimming off Barrow

Pinniped Unusual Mortality Event Update: See Page 2

IF YOU HARVEST A SEAL or other MARINE MAMMAL that is not looking healthy or is acting strange, please contact the NSB-DWM in Barrow at **907-852-0350** during days or **907-878-1793** or **907-878-1886** during evenings and weekends. In the Bering Strait region, contact the Marine Advisory Program in Nome at **855-443-2397** or **907-434-1149**. Or, call the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline at **877-925-7773**. You can find out more about this matter at the following NOAA websites: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/ and www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice/diseased/

Pinniped Unusual Mortality Event (UME) Update

During July 2011, the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management (NSB-DWM) wildlife biologists and hunters observed an unusual number (about 64) of *natchiq* (ringed seals) hauling out on the beaches near Barrow as well as an increase in recovery of dead ringed seals (49). Live seals appeared weak, tired, and were easily approachable on foot or by boat or 4-wheeler. Human disturbance did not cause a typical flight response. Hunters had observed patchy hair loss with skin sores, hair falling out easily, skin sores on the hind flippers and around the nose and eyes, labored breathing, shorter dive times and longer surface times, or odd smells. Abnormalities were also seen during butchering (discolored liver or spleen, bloody lungs, skinny animal, etc.). Russian hunters observed more ringed seals sinking when shot. Most cases on the North Slope were ringed seals but similar signs were later reported in other species in other areas: bearded seals, walrus near Pt. Lay, and spotted seals in the Bering Straits region. Cases were also reported from Chukotka, Russia, and northwest Canada.

During the spring/summer of 2012, hunters reported catching ringed seals that looked and acted healthy. No seals as sick as last year have been seen on the North Slope. However, monitoring for any possible cases continues.

A **UME (Unusual Mortality Event)** was declared by the federal government in December 2011 due to the number of animals involved, the number of species, and the geographical extent. This UME designation allows for federal funding to support the investigation. Dr. Raphaela Stimmelmayer of NSB-DWM has been designated as the UME on-site coordinator, leading the investigation in collaboration with Joel Garlich-Miller (US Fish and Wildlife Service), Aleria Jensen (National Marine Fisheries Service) and Dr. Stephen Raverty (Working Group Liaison).

We do not yet know what caused pinnipeds to be sick in 2011. There may be no single cause. The usual disease-causing viruses and bacteria have been checked. Testing continues for a wide range of other possible factors, including immune system-related diseases, fungi, man-made toxins and bio-toxins, radiation exposure, contaminants, and stressors related to sea ice change.



Examples of symptoms from 2011: hair loss (A, patchy to extensive), sloughing of skin at the base of the tail (B), skin lesions around the face and eyes (C) and on the hind flippers (D, E). Lesion size can range from very small up to 1/2 inch circular areas, and in some cases bleeding.

Results are being shared as they become available. The next update will be available after the January 2013 UME workshop.

Thanks to all of the hunters who have been so cooperative with sample collection. Subsistence hunters are important primary observers of what is happening. Your reports are helpful!

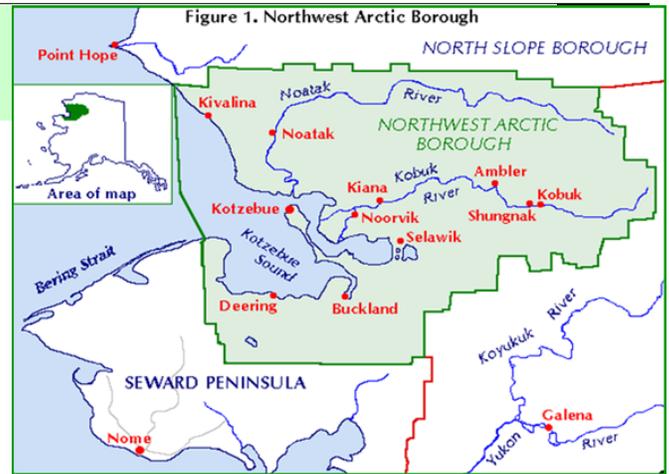


Spatial distribution of case reports (June-November 2011). Map courtesy of ANTHC/M. Brubaker.

Northwest Arctic Ice Seal Harvest Survey for 2012

A voluntary survey was conducted on Spotted, Bearded, Ringed and Ribbon seal harvest in the Native communities of Kivalina, Noatak, Deering and Buckland in the Northwest Arctic. The ISC helped fund this important project. Thanks to the villages for cooperating and

the village surveyors Ellen Swan and Clayton Barr of Deering, Gerald Walton and William Penn of Noatak, Lizzie Hawley and Jamie Hawley of Kivalina, Edwin Gavin and Dora Stalker of Buckland for doing a wonderful job. Very important data on seals of concern was also collected.



Report from the Communities:

Most of the hunters in all of the communities reported seeing warming conditions: ice melting early and leaving the shore earlier, ice thinning and black, and rotten ice. Deering reported seeing species of birds that have not been seen before.

Many of the ice seals observed were healthy and fat and harvesters were happy with their catch. Noatak reporting seeing lots of shrimp and small crabs in the seal stomachs. Buckland and Kivalina hunters noted seeing seals on the river.

However, a few seals of concern were noted. A Noatak hunter saw one sick seal out on the rotten ice, out of reach. Although two bearded seals with bald spots and lesions were seen near Kivalina in 2010, this

Harvested Ice Seals for communities in the Northwest Arctic in 2012

Communities / Seals		Deering	Noatak	Buckland	Kivalina	Total
Spotted Seal		2	22	75	20	119
Bearded Seal		42	57	42	117	258
Ringed Seal		0	2	23	15	40
Ribbon Seal		0	1	0	0	1
Loss	Killed but not caught	8	12	19	8	47
Total		52	94	159	160	465

year two bearded seals with just bald spots were seen: one from a distance, and one harvested but with nice, red meat and thick blubber. Buckland hunters saw two dead bearded seals on the ice with bald spots and lesions, but they did

look fat. One sick ringed seal observed was almost unrecognizable, two harvested spotted seals were very skinny, and one bearded seal had yellow-colored blubber. Buckland hunters also reported seeing two sick bearded seals in 2010.

Participation in the 2012 Ice Seal Harvest Survey for Northwest Arctic:

Communities	Deering	Noatak	Buckland	Kivalina	Total
Numbers of Households	42	114	86	82	324
Elders	4	53	NA	NA	57
Hunters	14	NA	NA	NA	14
Not Hunters	13	36	NA	NA	49
Not Home	5	1	11	3	20
Refuse	1	1	NA	2	4
No Equipment	4	NA	NA	NA	4



Thank you to Native Villages of Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, and Noatak for participating; without your help this survey would not be possible. It has been a great honor to serve my region and people. Sincerely, Enoch Shiedt

Ice Seal Committee

ISC Primary and Hunter Representatives:

AVCP

Timothy Charles Andrew and Albert Simon

BBNA

Helen Aderman and Frank Logusak, Sr.

Kawerak

Austin Ahmasuk and Brandon Ahmasuk

Maniilaq

Enoch E. Attamak Shiedt, Sr., and John Goodwin, Sr. (Chair)

NSB

Harry Brower, Jr., (Vice Chair,) and Billy Adams

Executive Manager

Mike Pederson

E-mail: mike.pederson@north-slope.org



The purpose of the Ice Seal Committee shall be to preserve and enhance the marine resources of ice seals including the habitat; to protect and enhance Alaska Native culture, traditions, and especially activities associated with subsistence uses of ice seals; to undertake education and research related to ice seals.

Send your pictures, reports or stories to Mike Pederson for the next newsletter!



www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife/Ice_Seal_Committee.php

Molly Chythlook Retires from ISC

After many years of dedicated service, Molly Chythlook retired from the Ice Seal Committee in July 2012. She represented the villages of the Bristol Bay region, and her efforts to protect the subsistence uses of ice seals throughout Alaska will be missed.



Molly was involved from the beginning during discussions on an ice seal Alaska Native Organization leading to the formation of the ISC. Her dedication and willingness to serve on several co-management boards was instrumental in developing and guiding the ISC to the present day.

According to Harry Brower, Jr., she is very vocal about her region's subsistence, which is key to bringing her knowledge to the committee and others; and not specific to one resource but several. She has dealt with natural resource issues relating to subsistence as well as challenges in maintaining customary and traditional rights to the land and re-



Molly working with ADF&G's Ted Krieg from Dillingham and Clara Martin from Togiak

sources, not only in Bristol Bay but throughout Alaska.

The ISC wishes Molly, and her husband Joe, many blessings as she retires to enjoy the subsistence lifestyle Bristol Bay has to offer. Congratulations, Molly! Thank you for your service.