

## ISC and Oil Spill Response

In November of 2013, ISC members attended the “Community Oil Spill Response in Bering & Anadyr Straits” workshop in Anchorage, hosted by the Wildlife Conservation Society. The goals of the workshop were to:

- 1) Recommend tools that could be safely and effectively deployed by hunters and community members in Chukotka and Alaska;
- 2) Establish training that would be required to sustain a local oil spill response;
- 3) Develop a budget and strategy for maintaining local spill response capacity in the Bering Strait region; and
- 4) Develop a communications plan for linking local communities with regional spill response planners.

Presentations were given by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC), the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Presentations were

also given by people with experience in previous oil spill response activities, such as the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill and the MV Selendang Ayu. Alaska Clean Seas and Nuka Research provided advice and experience regarding oil spill response.

The final day of the workshop was spent in small groups talking about what was needed to enhance oil spill response capacity in the Bering Strait region which could also be useful for North Slope communities. All groups identified the need for enhanced planning and funding. It was clear that specifying community and agency personnel committed to implementing tasks will be essential for enhancing capacity for spill response. For successful response, agencies or responsible parties will need to work with communities to use personnel, the limited infrastructure that might be available and traditional ecological knowledge.

This workshop was a valua-

ble first step in enhancing oil spill response capacity in villages in western and northern Alaska. At the beginning of the workshop, Willie Goodwin from the ABWC commented that lots of people have been talking but it is now time to act. That advice still holds true and the success of the workshop will depend on the follow-up.

In the January 2014 ISC meeting, the NOAA/NMFS Oil Spill Disaster Plan for the Arctic was discussed. The plan will contain response protocols such as oiling of marine mammals, testing of carcasses and dealing with food safety. They are also looking at the currently available infrastructure and what may be needed in the future.



**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 **907-750-5486** during evenings and weekends, if you are in the North Slope region. In the Bering Strait region, contact the Marine Advisory Program in Nome at **855-443-2397** or **907-434-1149**. For stranded animals, call the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline at **877-925-7773**.

## Young Nome and Unalakleet Boys catch their First Seals



Wyatt Ahmasuk was six years old when he first started hunting seals and he caught his first one, a spotted seal, at age seven. He learned seal hunting from his father, Brandon Ahmasuk of Nome, and his uncle and grandpa. Wyatt was “happy and excited I get to harvest my first seal. I told my dad my first catch is going to my grandpa.” The smile on Wyatt’s face in the picture at left tells it all!

Uncle Austin Ahmasuk and nephew Wyatt Ahmasuk, with his first spotted seal. Photo: Brandon Ahmasuk



Top (left to right): Kael hunting seals; Kael and Papa butchering; Kael and his first bearded seal.

Left: Kael with his first ringed seal. Photos: Karl Erickson



In spring 2014, Kael Erickson of Unalakleet caught his first seals. He was eight years old. He was taught by his “Papa”, Herb Ivanoff, and hunted in Norton Sound just outside of Unalakleet. Kael said “it felt good to share his catch.” Kael likes to catch seals and likes shooting them. He enjoys learning how to make and eat black dried meat and seal oil. Kael used a .22 rifle and a 17 HMR to catch his first seal. He shared his seal skins with his aunties, who sew a variety of handicrafts.

## Ice Seal and Walrus Project — Kawerak, Inc.

The Community-Based Documentation of Ice Seals and Walrus Project has made final products available at the Kawerak website: [www.kawerak.org/socialsci.html](http://www.kawerak.org/socialsci.html). Products include a “Seal and Walrus Hunting Safety Book” developed for youth, a “Traditions of Respect” booklet which teaches respectful handling of the catch, and “Policy-Based Recommendations from Kawerak’s Ice Seal and Walrus Project.” The document “Seal and Walrus Harvest and Habitat Areas for Nine Bering Strait Region Communities” provides subsistence use maps

and can be obtained directly from Kawerak, Inc.

Traditional knowledge contributors are from Diomedea, King Island, Savoonga, Nome, Elim, Koyuk, Shaktoolik, Saint Michael and Stebbins. This project was supported by Kawerak, Inc., the Eskimo Walrus Commission and the Ice Seal Committee, and funded by the Oak Foundation, the National Science Foundation and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.



# 2013 Ice Seal Harvest Report

The overall harvest for 2013 was good and most seals that were observed or harvested were healthy. Harvest information reporting is voluntary for hunters. Most regions have people that they can report to when they see sick or unhealthy seals. Harry Brower, Jr., mentioned that we need to work with biologists to continue monitoring ice seals and involve other organizations. NMFS re-iterated its statement from last year that the listing of bearded seals has no effect on subsistence harvests.

The ADF&G and the ISC stated that survey confidentiality has been the most important part of maintaining trust of the communities. The most important harvest information is the number of seals each community needs for subsistence, instead of how many particular household harvests need.

The community of Hooper Bay had 210 households surveyed for a complete accounting for 2013. There were 136 harvest surveys completed in Quinhagak and surveys were continuing through the winter.

The ADF&G continues to analyze



Bearded Seal. Photo credit: Brandon Ahmasuk

## ATTENTION ALASKA NATIVE SEAL HUNTERS

*Even though Ringed Seals are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, you are still allowed to harvest them. There is no quota in place, and there are no season restrictions. Current population estimates show healthy numbers.*

the 2013 survey data and should have the harvest report out soon. The ADF&G presented a document titled “*The Subsistence Harvest of Ice Seals in Alaska – A Compilation of*

*Existing Information, 1960-2012*” to the ISC. You can find this report on the ISC website, or contact Mike Pederson for a copy. There is a note on the “Use of Harvest Data” section on the first page that says “Extrapolation of this information is inappropriate until we understand more about harvest variability and community needs.”

The ISC is currently working with the ADF&G to identify more communities that are willing to complete these surveys. Thanks to all of the communities who have been submitting reports.

# Critical Habitat Proposed for Arctic Ringed Seals

NOAA Fisheries released their proposal for ringed seal critical habitat on December 1, 2014. This designation follows the listing of Arctic Alaskan ringed seals as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in December of 2012. This listing came about after scientific evidence that the sea ice will shrink in extent and duration in the future. The proposed designation includes all Alaskan waters within the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas (see NOAA Fisheries map below). No regulatory restrictions have been included in this designation, only a federal agency consultation requirement.

of this release. There is a 90-day public comment period and locations and times for public hearings will be announced by NOAA Fisheries soon. Comments will be considered and should address the relevant science and the economic impact, and can include areas that should be considered for exclusion from the proposed critical habitat. This designation does not affect subsistence harvest of ringed seals by Alaska Natives.

At the January 2014 ISC meeting in Anchorage, NOAA staff presented information on the process of designating critical habitat for the seals that were listed under the ESA. The Draft Alaska Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Report for ice seals was also presented. The basis for these reports was mostly for commercial fishing impacts on affected marine mammals in Alaska. We are now dealing with climate change impacts, oil and gas impacts, subsistence hunting and in some regions, commercial harvest of marine mammals.

More information on the proposal and updates for hearings can be found at: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice.htm>



Map of proposed critical habitat for Ringed Seals in Alaska (NOAA Fisheries)

Although the NOAA Fisheries press release states that there was “extensive input from local and state governments, Native partners...”, the ISC did not have input on this proposed designation and were not informed

## BBNA Marine Mammal Program

The BBNA Marine Mammal Program promotes research for sustainable marine mammal populations and subsistence harvest activities while emphasizing tribal involvement at all stages of research development and implementation. Including tribal Native knowledge with western science research is a way to enhance the Bristol Bay vision and to look to the future with research projects based on local priorities.

Local tribal participation includes marine mammal habitat population surveys, local Native knowledge documentation of marine mammal habitat utilizing GIS, providing local expertise to research teams, conducting marine mammal harvest survey data,



Jaclyn Christensen rendering seal oil.  
Photo: BBNA

and 'mentoring' interns at Round Island to learn hands on about walrus, Steller sea lion, and seabird productivity monitoring. We need to see if our animals are healthy in order to have a healthy community as marine mammals are a main traditional food source in our tribal communities.

The Marine Mammal Program focuses on the importance of continuing our traditional ways of life to include the 'best of both worlds' in enriching our tribal members' lifestyle. We have a diverse group of Alaska Natives in Bristol Bay, Aleuts (Sugpiaq, Ununga), Yup'ik Eskimo, Dena'ina Athabascan, who reside along freshwater lakes, freshwater riverine communities, coastal communities and islands. Although we live in a modern world, the Bristol Bay tribal members still practice their traditional way of life passed on by our Native ancestors who travelled by *qayaq* to hunt marine mammals.

## Hunter Involvement in ADF&G Seal Tagging

The Ice Seal Committee is working with ADF&G and the North Slope Borough to provide seal hunters with the training and opportunity to participate in ice seal research through their Hunter Involvement in Research Project. Training focuses on techniques related to safe capture and handling of live seals and deploying satellite transmitters. When these skills are coupled with a hunter's local knowledge of seal

movements, behavior, and availability we all learn much more about seals.

During 2014, hunters and researchers combined efforts by capturing and tagging seals near Barrow (3 ringed, 9 spotted seals), Kotzebue (1 bearded, 4 ringed seals), and Koyuk (3 beard-



Merlin Henry tagging a bearded seal near Koyuk. ADF&G photo. NMFS Permit #15324.



Frank Garfield, Boyuk Goodwin, Edward Ahyakak, and Kathy Frost tagging a ringed seal near Kotzebue.  
Photo: Denali Whiting. NMFS Permit #15324

The North Slope Borough tagging is funded by Shell as part of the NSB/Shell Baseline Studies Program, and the Kotzebue and Koyuk tagging is funded by BOEM. Both operate under the same NMFS research permit (#15324 held by ADF&G) and efforts are coordinated to maximize what we can learn from each tagged seal. An additional hunter training is being planned for this spring to involve more seal hunters from new communities in this important research.

## Ice Seal Satellite Tagging on the North Slope

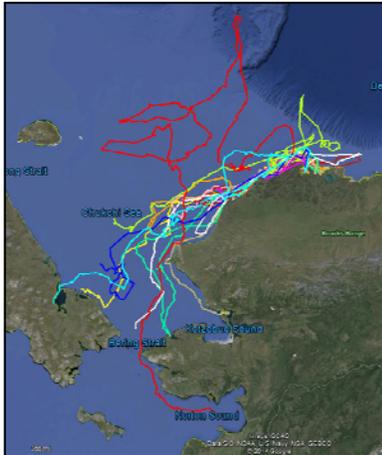
The NSB/Shell Baseline Study Ringed Seal Tagging Program has been ongoing since 2011 and is helping improve our knowledge of important habitat for seals by providing travel locations, dive data, and feeding activity. This information will help us to provide better mitigation solutions regarding human activities in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas.

The 2014 seal tagging season went very well with three ringed seals and ten spotted seals tagged.

With the help of seal hunters Joe Skin, Bobby Sarren, Isaac Leavitt, and Billy Adams, we located better places to set nets and improved our capture methods.

Travel routes of the tagged seals for 2014 can be seen in the map above. Tag dive data shows that most dives are about 250 feet deep or less, with the deepest dives (1500ft) occurring in the fall. Most dives lasted seven

minutes or less, although some dives in late summer were 22 minutes or longer. Male seals' dives tended to last longer than females in the fall.



Ringed seals (red and lime green lines) and Spotted Seals, from July-Oct 2014 and still transmitting.

There seem to be two general dive depths, possibly for two different purposes. There are dives of about 6-7 feet which seem to occur during travel, and deeper dives occurring during feeding activity.

Haul-out behavior varies with season, with the lowest percentage of time spent and shortest duration of haul outs during

September and October. The longest haul outs occurred during November and December.

Our preliminary findings indicate that: 1) some ringed seals winter in the Bering Sea and some in the Chukchi Sea; 2) spotted seals tend to follow the coastline, with several key stopover locations as they trav-



Joe Skin and Billy Adams holding a captured spotted seal. NMFS Permit #15324.

el south along the west coast; 3) ringed seals use pack ice above the continental shelf and Arctic basin to haul out while feeding; 4) dive depth and timing likely relate to prey location; and 5) daily timing of haul outs change seasonally.

We will continue tagging seals for the next few years in order to provide a large enough sample size to help confirm these findings as well as answer other questions. This project, funded by the NSB/Shell Baseline Studies Program, is allowed under NMFS permit #15324. Contact Andy VonDuyke with questions at 852-0350.

## ISC Current Research Priorities

The ISC has the following recommendations for ice seal research funding priorities: 1) collection of biological specimens for baseline health assessments; 2) understanding the ecosystem in near-shore waters where subsistence activities occur, such as in estuaries and bays and in the seas where ice seals migrate; 3) the involvement of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) with western science is a win-win situation in field and survey work; 4) further understanding of ice seal's prey availability during winter; 5) further under-

standing the impacts of commercial fishery on ice seals; 6) identifying potential sources of contaminants (i.e. oiled seals), potential harm to people who harvest them, and impacts on the overall health and population of the resource; 7) ongoing collection of ice seal harvest surveys in each region; 8) capacity-building in regions where ice seals occur (i.e., continue satellite tagging efforts and bio-sampling from subsistence harvested seals, especially in regions that have not participated previously).

Long-term studies are important for tagging, bio-sampling, timing of molt, and ice seal diets. Local people should be involved in design and conduct of the studies, with local hunters trained to catch, sample and tag seals.

The ISC opposes the adoption of a competitive program for federal research funds. If this continues, the ISC recommends that the ISC review any proposals focusing on ice seals, to include any affected user groups and TEK in the design study, and to provide written support under its co-management authority.



*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; and to undertake education and research related to ice seals.*



### Primary and Hunter Representatives:

#### AVCP

Timothy Charles Andrew  
Albert Simon

#### BBNA

Helen Aderman (Sec./Treas)  
Frank Logusak, Sr.

#### Kawerak

Brandon Ahmasuk  
Benjamin Payenna

#### Maniilaq

Cyrus R. Harris  
John Goodwin, Sr. (Chair)

#### NSB

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

#### Executive Manager

Mike Pederson  
mike.pederson@north-slope.org



Charles Elanna next to harvested bearded seal. Photo credit: Benjamin Payenna

Send your pictures, reports or stories to  
**Mike Pederson (mike.pederson@north-slope.org)**  
for the next newsletter!

[www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife-management/co-management-organizations/ice-seal-committee](http://www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife-management/co-management-organizations/ice-seal-committee)

## Pinniped Unusual Mortality Event (UME) Update

The Pinniped Unusual Mortality Event (UME) for Pacific Walrus has ended as of April 2014 due to no new cases being seen. What began in 2011 as a discovery of skin lesions, including hair loss in ice seals, and then walrus, has not been observed in walrus since that time. A formal report will be released within a year and made available to the ISC, other committees, and the general public.

The UME for Ice Seals remains open as cases of “healing or healed” sores have been observed from the Bering Straits region, suggesting these seals are survivors of the disease. We may never know the cause of the Pinniped UME; however, monitoring will continue through beach stranding surveys, examination of hunter concern animals, and baseline health studies.

As hunters are the first observers of wildlife diseases, please report any unusual observations. Please use the phone numbers provided on the first page.



A seal pup, found on the road system in Barrow in April 2014 by ISC members and NSB-DWM staff, was measured and weighed. It was deemed healthy and released back on the ice near a seal hole. Photo: NSB-DWM