Ice Seal Committee
Bering Sea • Chukchi Sea • Beaufort Sea

Ice Seal Committee Newsletter

Ice Seal Research and Issues Update

The District Court of Alaska issued a ruling on March 11, 2016, in the Ringed Seal litigation. The court overturned NMFS's listing of the Arctic subspecies of Ringed Seal as Threatened under the ESA, deciding that the listing was arbitrary and capricious and the lacked scientific evidence needed for justification. This decision is being currently reviewed, and there will likely be an appeal by NMFS. However, at this point, the ruling vacates the listing of the ringed seals. We are currently in litigation for the bearded seal listing, which was overturned in the District Court of Alaska in July 2014.

Alukka Ivanoff boating in Norton Sound outside of Unalakleet, and looking for ugruk.
Photo Credit: Beebucks Ivanoff

The ISC is still waiting for a decision on the proposed critical habitat designation for Arctic ringed seals. Public comments were due on March 30, 2015, and the decision was due by Spring 2016.

Ice seal harvest surveys are currently happening in the AVCP region. The ADF&G surveyors and ISC representatives have begun collecting data in the communities of Hooper Bay and Quinhagak.

Ringed Seal near Barrow.
Photo credit: Kate Stafford

The National Marine Mammal Lab from NOAA is currently conducting aerial surveys to estimate the population of ice seals in the northern Bering Strait/Chukchi Sea, flying out of Kotzebue and Barrow. They are using the infrared picture mark-recapture technique that was conducted two years ago in the southern Bering Strait and also on the Russian side of the Bering Strait. They will also try to capture pictures of polar bears in conjunction with the USFWS to provide an estimate of the Chukchi population.

The Unusual Mortality Event (UME) Group met on January 30, 2016. The purpose of the meeting was to review case material and draft various UME related working documents for review, including a comprehensive transboundary, spatial and temporal summary of the 2011-2015 cases. The group reviewed external clinical signs in the various affected ice seal species to highlight the differences by species, the timing, and the development of the UME. The economic and food security importance of the UME for the subsistence communities was stressed. An action plan for completion of the closure request for the UME was developed and tasks assigned for this to occur in the summer of 2016.

Satellite tagging of ice seals on the North Slope will continue this summer, with ringed and bearded seal tagging funded through the NSB Shell Baseline Studies program and spotted seal tagging funded through BOEM's MARES program.

The Ice Seal Co-Management Committee will meet on June 7 in Anchorage, in conjunction with the ISC Annual Meeting to be held on June 8-9, 2016.

Seal Tagging Workshop

Mark Nelson, ADFG, beginning the Seal Tagging Workshop with ISC members, hunters and taggers at the March 2015 ISC Meeting

A Seal Tagging Workshop was held at the March 2015 Ice Seal Committee meetings in Anchorage. The workshop was led by Mark Nelson, biologist with ADF&G. Some hunters have been trained to assist biologists when tagging seals. This workshop is intended to get more hunters involved in the seal tagging efforts.

Ice seals are tagged with satellite transmitters in order to better understand their movements, especially related to changes in sea ice, oil and gas activity, and other shipping traffic. Tags can provide information regarding what habitats are important to ice seals, whether nearshore or offshore, and the timing of those needs. These tagging efforts will allow for better information to be available to NOAA/NMFS when designating critical habitat or developing mitigation measures for development projects.

Historically, ADF&G has tagged bearded and ringed seals in Kotzebue Sound and Hooper Bay areas. Future plans include tagging in Kotzebue Sound, Norton Sound and the AVCP village areas. The NSB DWM has tagged ringed and spotted seals near Barrow and Wainwright. Future plans include tagging in the Colville delta and Kaktovik.

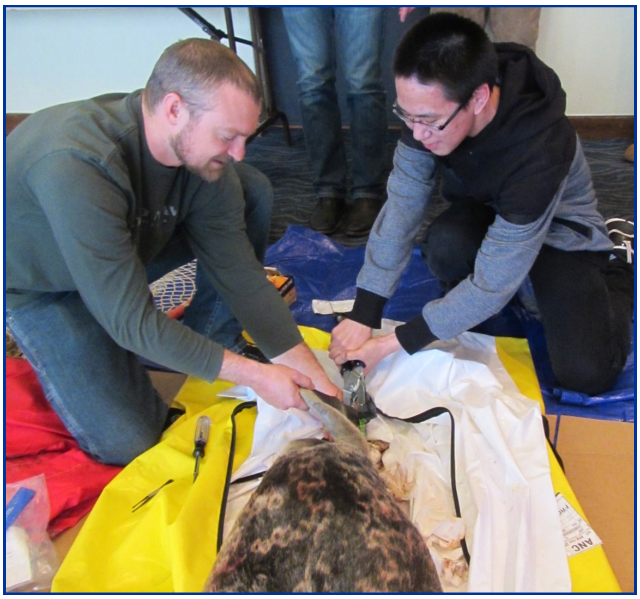
Tagging work must be done under a NMFS permit and, to date, these efforts have been conducted under the NMFS permit granted to ADF&G. Permits allow for certain types of activities to be performed, designates the individuals allowed to participate, describes the adopted methods of capturing seals, and more. Hunters have been involved in most of the tagging efforts listed above. Having hunters involved allows for more successful outcomes as traditional knowledge is used to help find seals, planning areas for setting nets, and learning how to handle seals. Having information from hunters who are living in the area year round can alert biologists to changes in timing of appearance of seals, or other life cycle activities.

After a general discussion, Mark and Billy Adams demonstrated how a seal is handled after capture. Since a live seal was not available, a ringed seal harvested by Billy from Barrow area was used. Safe handling techniques were demonstrated, using towels over the seals head and a hoop net. It was mentioned that as soon as a seal is captured, the time and location (with GPS if possible) should be noted.

Measurements were taken: the seal's length, including straight length and curved length, girth (axillary or at the "armpits") and weight. The age of the animal was estimated by counting the rings on a front claw. Determination of gender was explained and this seal happened to be a male. A general overview of the animal's appearance is also noted.

Mark showed how to prepare the hind flipper webbing for attachment of a flipper ID tag by clean-

Billy Adams showing hunters the placement of satellite tags



Mark Nelson helping Olemaun Hopson attach a flipper tag.

ing it with iodine or betadine, and using a biopsy punch to make a hole. The skin punch allows for a genetics sample to be collected from a live animal, and is placed in a vial of DMSO and salt, or it can be frozen. Mark helped Olemaun Hopson from Wainwright attach the green plastic tag, and then recorded the tag number and placement on the left hind flipper. This tag lets biologists know that this seal has been tagged previously, even if the satellite tag falls off.

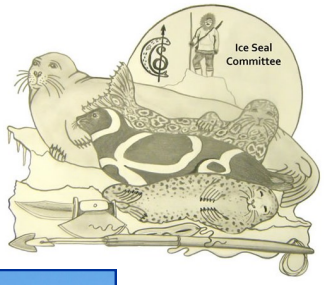
Satellite SPLASH tag placement on the head or back was shown. Billy demonstrated how to clean the area, dry it, apply a thin layer of epoxy glue to the seal and to the tag, and to hold the tag in place for 5-10 minutes to set up. Satellite SPOT tags can also be attached to the hind flipper in the same way the plastic ID tag was attached. Tag numbers are noted on the data sheet.

A whisker is taken from one side of the seal's mouth, using pliers. It can be placed into the same bag as the skin punch sample. Pictures are taken of the seal with the tags on it. Write down any comments about the seal, its behavior, anything about the tag attachment, and double check the data sheet. Finally, the seal can be gently released back into the water. The time and location of release are noted and a seal has been successfully tagged!

Thanks to Billy Adams for harvesting a ringed seal and bringing it to Anchorage for use during the workshop. After the workshop, the seal was brought to the ANSEP (Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program) building on the UAA campus. Billy demonstrated how to butcher a seal for the ANSEP students, while Raphaela Stimmelmayr, NSB-DWM veterinarian, demonstrated sample collection for routine health assessment. The seal meat was cut up and distributed to the students, along with some blubber that some students were going to render into *uqruq*. This dual use of the ringed seal was greatly appreciated by the hunters and the ANSEP students.

Seal Tagging Workshop attendees along with staff from ADFG, NSB-DWM, and NOAA/NMFS.

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)
Sam Gosuk
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

Left: Seal hunters, Bobby Sarren, Tavvin Leavitt, Jared Nayakik, and Qaiyaan Leavitt near Barrow this spring.

Photo credit: Billy Adams

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

Visit the ISC website!

www.north-slope.org/departments/wildlife-management/co-management-organizations/ice-seal-committee

2015 Ice Seal Harvest Report

The most recent ADF&G ice seal harvest report, "The Subsistence Harvest of Ice Seals in Alaska – A Compilation of Existing Information, 1960-2013," approved by the ISC on March 5, 2015, is available on the website (see link below). This report provides information on ice seal harvest numbers in communities and regions of the ISC. The harvest reporting provides important documentation to those estimating population sizes of ice seals, ensuring sustainable hunts into the future. The report can also be used to determine "where efforts need to be focused in the future." Hunters can help by contacting their regional representative with their harvest data. **www.north-slope.org/assets/images/uploads/SHOISiA_1960-2013__2015_approved.pdf**

Right: Kael Erickson with his first seal of the 2016 season near Unalakleet. Photo credit: Karl Erickson.

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.**