

Final Report

FOR:

**SUPPORT FOR THE CO-MANAGEMENT EFFORTS OF THE
ALASKAN ICE SEAL COMMITTEE**

NOAA Grant Number: NA08NMF4390510

Reporting Period: 07-01-2008 – 09-30-2012

Submitted by:

North Slope Borough
Department of Wildlife Management

Submitted to:

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December 28, 2012

INTRODUCTION

The North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management (NSB DWM) began to administer the Ice Seal Committee (ISC) grant on October 1, 2009. This was requested by the ISC in July 2008 and approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)/NOAA.

Ice seals (i.e. bearded, ringed, spotted and ribbon seals) are important subsistence resources for many villages in western and northern Alaska. They provide important sources of food and raw materials. Although it is known that coastal communities rely on ice seals for nutritional and cultural needs, the harvest levels are generally not recorded and therefore the number of seals needed annually statewide is not documented. Communities are concerned about rapidly changing arctic environmental conditions that are directly affecting ice seal habitat and hunter accessibility. These concerns resulted in the organizational planning and development of the ISC. Statewide planning meetings began in June 2003 within the Indigenous Peoples' Council of Marine Mammals with follow-up meetings resulting in adoption of By-laws in December 2004. Five voting members, representing five Alaska Native regions that use ice seals, make up this Committee. They are: Bristol Bay Native Association (Bristol Bay), Association of Village Council Presidents (Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta), Kawerak, Inc. (Bering Straits), Maniilaq Association (Northwest Alaska), and the North Slope Borough (Arctic Slope). Each regional organization that is represented on the ISC is recognized as an Alaska Native Organization that is tribally authorized to act for the conservation and management of ice seals.

The goals of the ISC include self-regulation and management, identifying regional research priorities, generating funding opportunities, and cooperation with other organizations at the local, statewide, federal and international levels. In January 2006 a multi-organizational meeting finalized a statewide comprehensive Ice Seal Research Plan that included primary participation from the ISC, the National Marine Mammal Laboratory, University of Alaska, and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game. This research planning document identifies needed research and attempts to coordinate funding efforts. The ISC has identified the following priorities:

- ▶ Identify population status and trends
- ▶ Identify contaminants and their source
- ▶ Determine health of seal populations
- ▶ Collect harvest data
- ▶ Develop hunter education programs
- ▶ Identify effects of climate change
- ▶ Identify anomalies
- ▶ Insure community feedback on research results

Using the research priorities and the currently unfunded projects identified under the collaborative Ice Seal Research Plan, the ISC will serve to meet the management and research needs of Alaska Native communities.

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The ISC signed a co-management agreement with NMFS in October 2006. Some of the organizational tasks that needed to be done to implement the goals of the ISC have been accomplished. These include the:

- (1) Continued support for the co-management agreement including management planning, and semi-annual or annual meetings;
- (2) Development of a studies plan for research, harvest monitoring, biological sampling by community members, traditional knowledge studies, contaminants studies, and population status and trend assessments by adopting an Ice Seal Management Plan, and
- (3) Development of an outreach and education program, possibly including the development and maintenance of a website and the continuing of drafting and distribution of newsletters.

The NSB DWM was awarded grant funding to provide basic administrative support to the ISC, which included general administration to implement the co-management agreement. We have provided travel and travel related expenses for committee members to attend semi-annual, annual, co-management as well as other relevant meetings. We have assisted in organizing the meeting venues and preparing the meeting materials. We have provided administrative support for research collaborations, harvest monitoring, outreach programs, and dealing with issues relating to ice seals as they arise.

The grant covered the salary and benefits of the Executive Manager of the ISC. This person also serves in his normal job duties as a Subsistence Research Coordinator for the NSB DWM. The Executive Manager has kept the ISC apprised of all new issues dealing with ice seals as well as providing administrative support.

A teleconference meeting of the ISC was held on October 6, 2009 to introduce the NSB as the new grant administrator and to follow-up on items from the previous meeting held on July 14-16, 2009.

A semi-annual meeting of the ISC was held in Anchorage, Alaska on November 3-4, 2009. John Goodwin Sr. representing Maniilaq Association (Northwest Arctic) was re-elected Chair; Harry

Brower Jr. representing the NSB (Arctic Slope) was re-elected Vice-Chair; Molly Chythlook representing Bristol Bay Native Association (Bristol Bay region) was re-elected Secretary/Treasurer. Each regional representative of the ISC presented regional reports – mostly discussing the harvest of ice seals, climate change and its effect on harvesting of ice seals, and issues relating to the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ISC reviewed and offered comments on the short-term goals of the Strategic Plan. The ISC reviewed the *Alaska Ice Seal Research Plan, 2010*. This plan is a consolidated plan for all Alaskan ice seal research funded in whole or in part through the NMFS budget. Research on Alaska's ice seals is carried out principally by NMFS, Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game, and the Alaska Native regions represented by the ISC. The combined research efforts by these groups focus on ice seal population abundance and trends, harvest, stock identification, general biology and life history, and human interactions. This plan describes 12 current and on-going projects and an additional 10 project proposals that identify and address specific research needs, including the identity and status of ice seal populations, the comprehensive assessment of ice seal mortality including harvest, and the impact of industrial and climatological events on ice seal habitat. The research plan plays a key role in the co-management process put in place by the ISC and NMFS. The Plan enhances communication between the research agencies and the ISC by establishing a framework that will assist in setting priorities and tracking performance of research projects. The Plan is expected to provide helpful information to the Alaska Scientific Review Group about ice seal population status and research. Two resolutions were passed. Resolution #2003-001 is a resolution of the ISC supporting community participation in the Kawerak, Inc. project – Community Mapping of Ice Seals and Walrus. The objective of this project is to document and map ice seal and walrus subsistence use areas, document and map frequently used marine areas and travel routes related to ice seals and walrus, document the problems and challenges to the continuation of subsistence ice seal and walrus hunting, document other local and traditional knowledge related to ice seals and walrus, specifically the social and cultural importance of the subsistence activity and resource, and to use documented information to advocate for local solutions and policy reform. Resolution #2009-02 is a resolution changing the registered office location of the ISC. Several researchers presented reports and posters on ice seal research, such as tagging in Kotzebue Sound and ice seal survey results. The NMFS decision on the Spotted Seal ESA Listing Petition was reviewed (October 2009). NMFS completed a comprehensive status review of the spotted seal under the ESA. Based on the findings from the status review and consideration of the factors affecting this species, NMFS concluded that the spotted seal exists as 3 distinct population segments (DPS), which are the Southern, Okhotsk, and Bering. NMFS determined the Southern DPS is likely to become endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range in the foreseeable future and should be listed as a threatened species. NMFS issued a proposed rule to list the Southern DPS of the spotted seal as threatened. Because the Southern DPS occurs outside the U.S., no critical habitat can be designated.

Some members of the ISC attended the International Arctic Fisheries Symposium in Anchorage, Alaska on October 19-21, 2009; the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC) meeting in Anchorage, Alaska on November 10-12, 2009; the Shell Oil meetings with other marine mammal organizations in Anchorage, Alaska on December 8, 2009; and the Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals (IPCOMM) in Anchorage, Alaska on December 10, 2009. These meetings help keep the ISC apprised of various related issues such as dealing with the Marine Mammal Protection Act; and offshore oil and gas exploration activities.

The ISC held a teleconference meeting on February 9, 2010. Among the topics discussed were regional reports, agency reports, and an update on the NSB Travel Policy. The ISC Chair, or his designee, attended the following meetings: Alaska Marine Mammal Symposium – January 2010; NOAA FY 2011 Budget Briefing – March 2010; and the Open Water Meeting – March 2010. Members of the ISC attended the IPCOMM meeting in Anchorage, Alaska on October 6-7, 2010, and the ABWC meeting in Anchorage, Alaska on November 9-10, 2010 as invited guests.

The ISC held an annual meeting in Anchorage, Alaska on November 16-18, 2010. Regional reports were discussed, as before. The ISC re-affirmed the short-term goals of the Strategic Plan. Resolution #2010-001 was passed and is a resolution appointing the NSB Dept. of Wildlife Management as the designated Fiscal Agent for the ISC.

At this meeting, the Research Objectives of the ISC for 2010-2011 include:

Harvest Monitoring Program:

- a. Develop a standardized harvest monitoring program that can be used in all regions;
- b. Develop a central database for ice seal harvest data and yearly updates;
- c. Collect harvest data on a yearly basis from all villages that harvest ice seals; and
- d. Maintain a bio-monitoring program for contaminants and emerging diseases.

Movement and Habitat Use:

- a. Document seasonal use patterns and movements of all species;
- b. Document traditional and current haul-out locations for all species; and
- c. Document changes in hunting access to ice seals due to changes in ice conditions, animal distribution, and anthropogenic disturbances.

Stock Status and Trends:

- a. Obtain current population estimates of all ice seals;
- b. Identify trends and population status; and
- c. Determine stock structure of all ice seals.

The ISC also wants to look at the diet of ice seals, such as salmon. The ISC encourages regions that are currently doing ice seal research, to bring others from other regions to observe the

research and to develop capacity to do research; and to build tribal and regional capacity as it relates to ice seals. The ISC approved the Core Funding & Research Proposal as discussed at the Nov. 16, 2010 work session. This proposal is based on the Alaska Native Co-Management Funding Program, with its first funding year in 2012. Several presentations were discussed by other organizations doing ice seal research, or research on other marine mammals that impact ice seals.

The ISC prepared a plan to spend down the remaining funds on this grant. The ISC approved to do a harvest survey in the Northwest Arctic by the regional representative organization, Maniilaq Association. The attached *2012 Ice Seal Harvest Survey for Northwest Arctic* is attached as a separate document to this report. All communities identified in the work plan have been surveyed except for Kotzebue. They have requested their survey to be done in late summer 2012. Due to a change in leadership, the Kotzebue IRA refused to participate in this harvest survey.

CONCLUSIONS

Funding of the ISC has been successful in terms of working with a co-management organization made up of people who are knowledgeable about their hunting traditions and harvest of ice seals, the subsistence users of this particular resource, and the traditional ecological knowledge that they have gained by experience, and learned first-hand as it was passed down from one generation to the next.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the efforts of the ice seal hunters of Alaska for their collaboration and support. We thank Shawn Carey from NMFS in assisting in the administration of these funds. We thank Sarah Ellis from the NSB Grants Division in managing grant funds, as well as staff from the Dept. of Wildlife Management for assisting in travel and related processing of paperwork: Janell Kaleak, Lucia Johnston, Molly Spicer and Dolores Vinas