



Healthy Animals, Healthy People, Healthy Environment

The NSB-DWM Marine Mammal Health Program

The Chukchi and Beaufort Seas are home to large numbers of marine mammals that are important subsistence resources for the North Slope communities. The main objective of the NSB-DWM Marine Mammal Health Program is to work with hunters and community members on the North Slope to better understand healthy, harvested animals, and to investigate diseases and parasites for hunter-concern animals. We support the traditional and customary practices that guide decision making on when an animal is used for subsistence, and we continue to monitor and watch for the major man-made and environmental threats to the health of our marine mammals today.



Why do we do it?

Hunter observations, as with many scientific studies, indicate that the Arctic is undergoing major changes in duration of seasonal sea ice extent and sea ice thickness, extreme weather patterns, increased maritime traffic, etc. Coupled with these environmental changes are changes in animal distribution, migration routes and timing, start of breeding season, and arrival of new species, just to name a few.

By continually monitoring the health of animals, we can detect diseases and contaminants that may be of concern early on, provide information to hunters regarding “healthy” and “hunter concern” catches, and address individual and community concerns about subsistence food health, food safety, and food security. We hope that our Marine Mammal Health Program continues to support the families and communities of the North Slope as they continue to adapt to changing environmental conditions, wildlife abundance and wildlife accessibility.

How do we do it?

We are contacted by a hunter and we go to their harvest or butchering site. The animal is measured and observed for age, sex, and body condition. Samples of various tissues (blubber, muscle, liver, kidney, stomach contents, etc.) are collected and the animal is examined for signs of disease, presence of parasites, injuries, etc. Samples are archived and, over time, are analyzed for contaminants, nutrients, and other health studies. We also respond to hunter-concern or beach-cast marine mammals where the animal is also measured and sampled in order to answer a hunter’s concerns or to determine cause of death.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to the North Slope hunters who allow us to sample their food and who alert us to animals of concern when they are encountered. Without them, this work could not be done. Quyanaq! **Questions or Concerns?** Please contact the NSB-DWM research biologist, Raphaela Stimmelmayer, at 852-0350 or email her at raphaela.stimmelmayer@north-slope.org.