



THE ALASKA SEA OTTER AND STELLER SEA LION COMMISSION

Spring 2020
Newsletter

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REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

Greetings from the Alaska Sea Otter and Steller Sea Lion Commission! We hope that you and your family are healthy and safe. We debated and even held off for a time publishing a newsletter during these times. We know this is a difficult and scary time. We are all concerned about the health and safety of our Elders, our loved ones and our communities.

We hope that you find the news we are sharing interesting and a good diversion from the daily news updates.

I have always advocated for the continuation of our cultural and traditional subsistence activities. We need to remember the importance of continuing our traditional ways even in these challenging times. Continuing our traditional practices helps to keep us whole. Having that connection will help to keep our minds and spirits and bodies healthy as we adjust to a new kind of normal.

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REPORT *continued from Page 1*

As we adjust to this new kind of normal, we need to consider how to practice our traditional ways while being mindful of tribal, local and State mandates and best practices for keeping everyone safe.

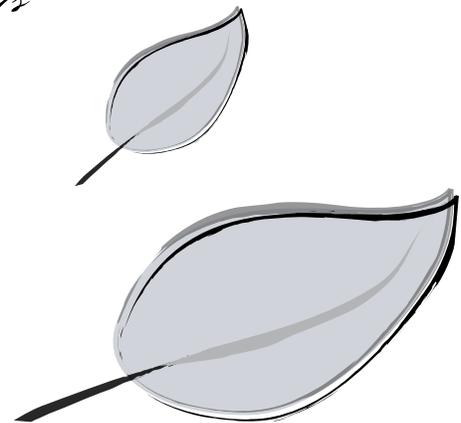
- Keep your hunts limited to household or family members. Keep the hunting party as small as possible.
- If you are sick, stay home!
- Wear protective gear such as cloth masks, gloves and wash or sanitize your hands as often as possible if you are with hunting partners outside of your household.
- Bring your own knives, totes and other processing gear if hunting with people outside of your household.
- Limit interaction as much as possible when sharing the harvest. Make arrangements to drop packages off on porches to Elders and others. Keep interactions at a distance (6 ft +) when visiting while sharing.
- If you are tagging or reporting the harvest, be prepared for remote reporting.

We will get through this. We need to be careful with our actions now to make sure that Covid-19 has the least impact on our communities now.

We can't wait until we can all be together again.

Qayanaasinag!

Margaret Roberts
Chair



UPDATES FROM THE 2020 STELLER SEA LION WORKSHOP BY DR. JENNA MALEK, NMFS

On Friday, January 31, 2020, Steller sea lion researchers and managers gathered to participate in the 2020 Steller Sea Lion Workshop (Workshop), co-hosted by the National Marine Fisheries Service Protected Resources Division (NMFS PRD) and the NMFS Marine Mammal Lab (MML). The workshop followed up on the Alaska Marine Science Symposium (AMSS), held in Anchorage at the Hotel Captain Cook, where researchers, managers, and other interested parties learned about the latest science taking place throughout Alaska.

During the Workshop, representatives from NMFS PRD (including TASSC co-management representative Dr. Jenna Malek, and Steller sea lion coordinator, Kim Raum-Suryan), MML (including Drs. Tom Gelatt and Brian Fadely, who have presented at past TASSC meetings), the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADFG), universities, and other organizations shared the latest updates on Steller sea lion research, plans for future projects, and discussed ways that the different parties could coordinate to increase collaboration and the utilization of available resources.

Participants discussed how to better communicate and coordinate throughout the year with each other, as well as with additional interested parties such as Alaska Native co-management partners. Another Workshop will likely be planned during the week of AMSS 2021.

Highlights from the presentations during the Workshop included:

- MML plan conduct vessel-based studies of Steller sea lions in the Western and Central Aleutian Islands in June-July, 2020 and in the Eastern Aleutian Islands, and the Western and Central Gulf of Alaska in July 2020. *These studies will help estimate survival, reproductive rates, and movements of Steller sea lions.*
- MML plan to conduct aerial surveys of Steller sea lions in Southeast Alaska and the Eastern Gulf of Alaska in June-July 2020, *Surveys will help track overall and regional trends in population abundance to monitor the recovery of the endangered western population (see page 4 for results of the 2019 surveys).*
- Researchers will be branding ~750 Steller sea lion pups along the Russian coast in summer 2020
- Various studies and analyses are being conducted to better understand Steller sea lion diet, contaminant exposure, predation risk, etc.

Note: due to travel restrictions and hunker-down orders as a result of Covid-19, MML field work is currently cancelled.

In other NMFS news, The Western Distinct Population Segment Steller sea lion *Eumetopias jubatus* 5-Year Review: Summary and Evaluation has been completed and is now available on NMFS website. It is also available at <https://www.seaotter-sealion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/steller-sea-lion-5year-review-0220.pdf>



Photo © T. Beckes

2019 STELLER SEA LION SURVEYS

Every year, the Alaska Fisheries Science Center with the National Marine Mammal Lab out of Seattle conduct Steller sea lion surveys in Alaska. Because Alaska has so much coastline, it is not possible to survey the entire range every year. Rather the survey is conducted on a cycle where the entire range is counted over 2 consecutive years. Both pups and non-adults are counted. In odd years, the survey effort focuses on the Gulf of Alaska including Southeast Alaska. In even years, the Aleutians is the focus of the survey effort, and sometimes they survey into the Western Gulf if it was not able to be surveyed the prior year.

The 2019 survey was conducted using Twin Otter planes equipped with 3 high resolution cameras. The objective was to survey all rookeries and haulouts in Gulf of Alaska including Southeast Alaska. The surveys are conducted in late June through mid-July, approximately 10 days after the average date that sea lions give birth on the rookeries.

Raw Counts:

- Eastern, Central and Western Gulf: 20,129 live juvenile or adult sea lions on 86 sites, and 6,898 live pups from aerial photos on 32 sites
- Southeast Alaska: 18,827 live non-pups on 24 sites (haulouts were not surveyed) and 6,984 pups from aerial photos on 18 sites

100% of sites were surveyed in the Eastern and Central Gulf, and 90% of sites were surveyed in the Western Gulf (3 haulouts sites were missed). A new site for the survey, Suklik, was discovered Northeast of Chignik and South of Kodiak Archipelago.

Western Population Models:

Modeling the survey results, there are 40,351 non-pups in the Western population. This is 1,431 fewer non-pups than was reported in 2018. The population grew at a rate of 1.82% per year from 2002 to 2019, a lower rate of increase than reported for the last 4 years. There have been declines in the estimated number of juveniles and adults in the central and eastern Gulf of Alaska for the last several years, and the estimated number of juveniles/adults have not been this low since 2011.

Regionally, while all regions surveyed saw annual increases since 2002, they were at a slower rate than in prior years. From 2015 to 2017, there was a decline in the eastern Gulf and an increase in the central Gulf which was likely due to unusual movements of juveniles and adults. The Western Gulf was not affected. In 2019, looking at the Eastern and Central Gulf regions, there is a decline of 2,628 non-pups from what was reported in 2017. It does not appear that this movement pattern continued based on declines in juveniles/adults in both the eastern and central Gulf areas in 2019.

The lower number of pups in 2017 growing into juveniles by 2019 may explain some of the lower numbers of non-pups seen in 2019, it does not fully account for the lower numbers. More likely is lower survival due to decreased food availability and/or movement to Southeast Alaska. Decreased food availability is thought to be linked to the 2014-2016 Blob, a large, warm mass of water in the North Pacific. This is believed to have severely affect groundfish, such as Pacific cod populations. Based on the 2019 survey results, it appears that there may be lingering effects of the Blob on sea lions.

2019 STELLER SEA LION SURVEYS *continued...*

Looking at pup counts, there are a total of 12,581 pups in the Western DPS. This is an increase of 1.63% per year, which is 628 more than was reported in 2018.

Southeast Population Models:

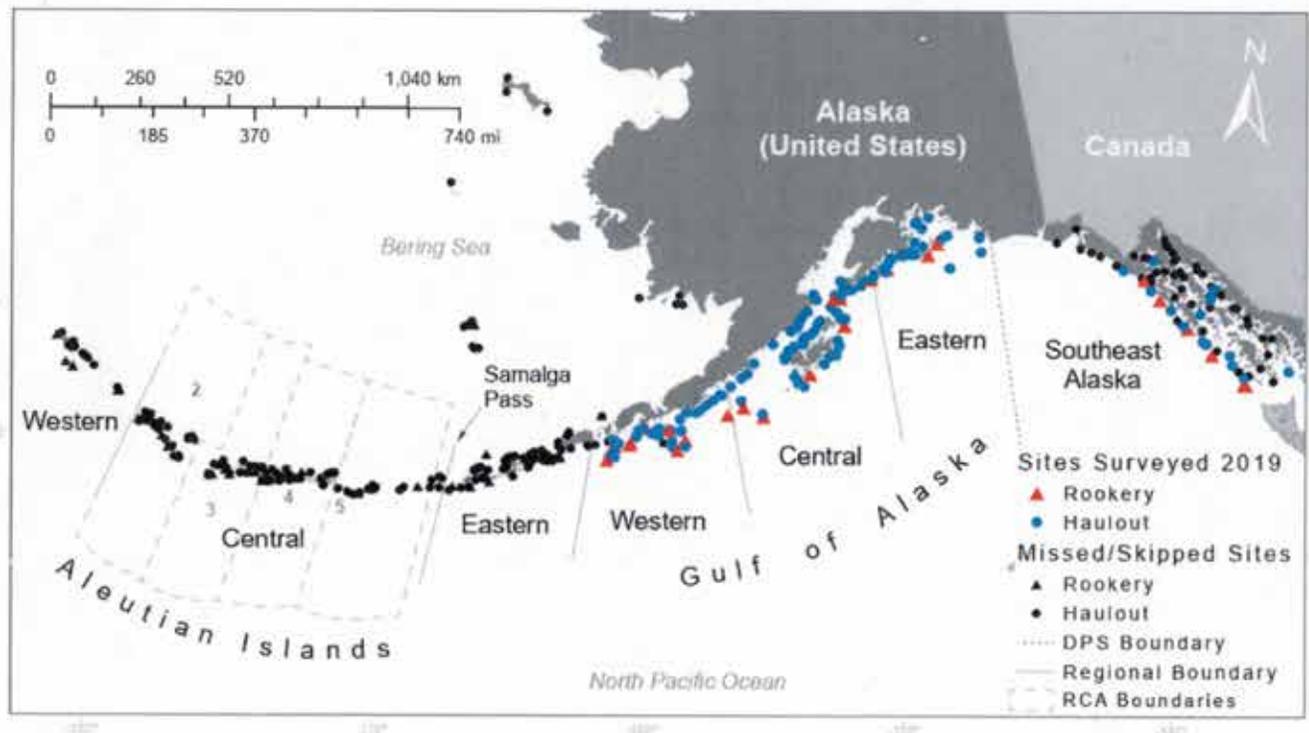
Non-pups are estimated to be 22,610, increasing at a rate of 2.53% per year. This is a higher rate of increase than reported in 2018. Pup estimates are 7,396, a slightly lower rate of increase of 2.85% per year than reported in 2017. Pup counts have been relatively stable since 2009 in Southeast.

The increase in non-pups in Southeast Alaska may be linked to the decreases in the Eastern and Western Gulf regions of the Western populations, however there has not been a corresponding sightings of Western branded sea lions in Southeast.

For a complete copy of the 2019 survey report: https://www.seaotter-sealion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SSL_Aerial_Survey_2019_final_508.pdf

Graphic below: Sweeney, K.L., B. Birkemeier, K. Luxa and T. Gelatt. 2019. Results of Steller Sea Lion Surveys in Alaska, June-July 2019. Memorandum to the Record.

Figure 1—Steller sea lion terrestrial rookeries and haulouts surveyed in June-July 2019. Survey regions, rookery cluster areas (RCAs), and the boundary between the eastern and western distinct population segments (DPS) in Alaska are also shown.



**REPORT FROM CHUGACH REGIONAL RESOURCES COMMISSION
BY WILLOW HETRICK-PRICE, CRRC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

September – December, 2019

Patty Schwalenberg, Executive Director, retired on 12/31/2019 and the Board of Directors named myself, Willow Hetrick-Price as the new Executive Director. I have been working for CRRC since 2009 in various capacities, most recently as the Deputy Director. When I was born (in Anchorage) my parents lived in Main Bay and Cannery Creek fish Hatcheries in Prince William Sound. After years of living remotely, we moved to Moose Pass Alaska on the Kenai Peninsula. After leaving for college, I returned to Anchorage to continue my education at UAA and UAS and join the workforce. Southcentral is our home, and I am honored and thrilled to be considered for this position and am looking forward to continuing to undertake important issues in the Chugach Region.

In 2016, CRRC began focusing efforts on traditional food sovereignty and subsistence resource management. Most of this funding has been supported by the First Nations Development Institute. The latest grant application (funded in FY19 for FY20 work) will support the efforts of CRRC's initiative titled: "Chugach Hunting, Fishing, and Gathering Taskforce - Empowering our People, Encouraging Involvement, Changing Regulations." This grant will support CRRC in providing trainings in each of the member Tribes on the federal agencies, boards, and councils that regulate subsistence resources in Alaska, such as the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals, Federal Subsistence Board and the Advisory Councils, the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council and the Boards of Fish and Game.

In each community CRRC will host a two-day workshop to introduce subsistence management systems in Alaska, provide hands-on learning workshop sessions for understanding local regulations and developing recommendations/actions for change, draft effective proposals, review of proposals affecting subsistence regulations in Alaska, and encourage methods of providing effective testimony. A program that brings these specific trainings to rural residents to engage in developing hunting and fishing regulations will strengthen understanding of fish and wildlife management issues. The opportunity for tribal advocates to share information and desires will enhance tribal testimonials at regulatory meetings.

Due to Covid-19, we had to cancel the 19th Annual Subsistence Memorial Gathering that was scheduled to be held on March 26, 2020 in Anchorage.

We've implemented a newsletter, and hope you will sign up to receive quarterly updates on our organization. You can sign up on our website at: <http://www.crrcalaska.org/website/>

Respectfully submitted,

Willow Hetrick-Price

Willow Hetrick-Price Executive Director

2020 BLOB UPDATE

You may remember last fall, it was looking as if the Blob, the unusually large, persistent and warm mass of water that was in the North Pacific from 2014 to 2016 may have been back. Last September, there was a large mass of warmer water in the North Pacific. The Northeast Pacific Heatwave 2019, or NEP 19 (otherwise known as the Blob 2) did end up dissipating this winter.

The NEP19 lasted 225 days and covered 3.2 million square miles at its peak. The NEP 19 was significantly different from the original Blob in that it was much shallower in depth. As it turned out, the weather patterns and temperatures did indeed shift towards cooler temperatures and we experienced a very cold and snowy winter.

The Blob had far reaching effects, causing mass strandings of marine mammals and birds. It had devastating effects on the Pacific cod biomass, a key prey species for Steller sea lions. It also affected salmon and steelhead runs, and unprecedented harmful algal blooms occurred throughout the North Pacific.

However, even though the NEP 19 has dissipated, the deep ocean still retains heat and climate models used indicate that warmer waters will continue in coastal waters. What this year brings remains to be seen but sea surface temperatures continue to be monitored.

For more information: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/new-marine-heat-wave-resembles-killer-blob-that-devastated-sea-life-on-west-coast-noaa-says/>

ABOUT THE COMMISSION

The Alaska Sea Otter Commission was formed in 1988 to promote Native participation in resource policy decisions affecting sea otters and their uses. In November, 1998, the Commission expanded its role as a statewide organization to advocate on behalf of Steller sea lion and Alaska Native relationships. The organization officially expanded to The Alaska Sea Otter and Steller Sea Lion Commission (TASSC).

OUR GOALS ARE TO:

- Develop and implement programs and projects that focus on Alaska Native and tribal participation in sea otter and Steller sea lion conservation, management and artistic development.
- Strengthen TASSC operational capacity, communications and outreach, and build TASSC operational and program resources.
- Work with regulatory agencies, tribal governmental and Alaska Native Organizations to build better relationships and work toward the common goal of conservation and management of healthy sea otter and Steller sea lion populations in Alaska.
- Educate and inform our youth and the public on the traditional and contemporary relationship between the sea otters and Steller sea lions and Alaska Natives.



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