

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.S.-RUSSIA BILATERAL POLAR BEAR AGREEMENT
6th Annual Meeting of the Scientific Working Group Meeting
Sochi, Russia
20-21 October 2015

1. The sixth annual meeting of the Scientific Working Group (SWG) designated to support the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission (the “Commission”) took place on 20-21 October 2015 in Sochi, Russia. The SWG meeting was attended by 8 members of the SWG (including cochairs Stanislav Belikov and Eric Regehr; Attachment 1), as well as invited specialists and observers. The Commission is responsible for implementation of the *Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population*. The main objectives of the meeting were as follows: (1) Review new scientific information and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) on the Alaska-Chukotka (AC) polar bear population. (2) Review annual removals from the AC population and provide recommendation on subsistence harvest to the Joint Commission. (3) Update the document Study Plan for the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population (2013-2015) for the period 2016-2018, to include joint research and studies on Wrangel Island.
2. The SWG received the following presentations from members and invited specialists:
 - a) Update on new scientific information and TEK on polar bears in Russia (S. Belikov, I. Modvinste, S. Kavry [invited specialist], N. Ovsyanikov)
 - b) Update on new scientific information and TEK on polar bears from the U.S. (R. Wilson, E. Regehr, C. Brower)
 - c) Research on ice seals in the U.S. portion of the Chukchi Sea (CS) region (A. Von Duyke)
 - d) Review efforts to monitor harvest, and information on all forms of take from the AC population in the calendar year 2014 (E. Regehr for U.S.; N. Ettyne [invited specialist] for Russia)
 - e) Human activities and development in the CS region; including an update on offshore oil and gas exploration in the U.S. in 2015, and oil spill modeling (R. Wilson); and information on important habitat and hunting areas on the coast of Chukotka (S. Kavry [invited specialist])
3. Members of the SWG made the following recommendation to the Commission:

- The SWG recognized that new biological information considered at this meeting did not suggest the need to change the current estimate of sustainable harvest level for polar bears from the AC population. Therefore, the SWG recommends no change to the current sustainable harvest level of up to 58 bears per year, of which no more than 1/3 will be female, or to the multiyear quota system as adopted by the Commission.*
 - *Nine of 10 voting SWG members supported this majority recommendation. One member supported a minority view that a more precautionary approach should be adopted and that any harvest imposed a risk to the population.
- The SWG urged the Commission to consider all sources of risk to the AC population, which in the US portion of the Chukchi Sea region include risks associated with management without a collaborative approach that includes communication with and support of hunters and communities that will be affected (e.g., poor harvest reporting, loss of biological information, increased bear mortality).
- The SWG encouraged the Commission to support recurring workshops to promote standardized methods, and to promote coordination between the U.S. and Russia on joint studies and monitoring efforts, including establishment of consistent methods for genetic analyses and community-based monitoring.
- The SWG recommended that Hilary Cooley (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) replace Todd Atwood (U.S. Geological Survey) as a member of the American section of the SWG, and that Andrew Von Duyke (North Slope Borough) be added as a member of the American section of the SWG to fill a vacant seat.
- The SWG requested that the Commission support the participation of all SWG members, and assist with identifying replacements for members that are repeatedly not able to attend meetings of the SWG, in a manner consistent with the Terms of Reference of the SWG.

4. Members of the SWG reached the following decisions:

- a) The SWG reviewed and agreed upon updated information needs for the AC population; identified and prioritized studies to meet these information needs; and identified requests to the Commission for assistance. The SWG incorporated this in a finalized document entitled *Information Needs and Joint Research Studies for the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population (2016-2018)*.
- b) Recognizing the ecological importance of Wrangel Island to the AC polar bear population, the SWG reviewed and agreed upon updated information needs related specifically to studies on Wrangel Island; and identified and prioritized studies to meet these information needs. The SWG incorporated this in a document entitled *Information Needs and Joint Research Studies on Wrangel Island (2016-*

2018); which will be finalized through correspondence in the weeks after the SWG meeting. This document identified the following priority actions related to Wrangel Island for the period 2016-2018 (not in any particular order):

- a. Ground-based visual surveys to estimate indices of abundance, distribution, demographic composition, and body condition of polar bears on Wrangel Island during the autumn.
 - b. Use remote sensing satellite imagery to estimate the number and distribution of polar bears on Wrangel Island during the summer and autumn.
 - c. Collection of genetic samples via systematic hair snaring during ground-based visual surveys and/or through biopsy darting of polar bears on Wrangel during the autumn.
 - d. Use oil spill trajectory models to evaluate potential for polar bears to be exposed to oil on and adjacent to Wrangel Island.
- c) The SWG will develop draft standards for the development and review of information used in management decisions, to including the protocol and timeline by which scientific information and TK are presented to SWG. This draft document will be reviewed by the Group at its next annual meeting.
- d) The SWG identified the importance of performing updated assessments of movements and distribution of the AC population and adjacent populations, based on scientific information and Traditional Knowledge; and recognized the importance of this assessment to informing effective management.
- e) The SWG acknowledged the importance of an updated estimate of population size and trend for the purpose of recommending a sustainable harvest level; acknowledging that population size is the most difficult parameter to estimate for wildlife population, and that some inputs to the current recommendation of sustainable harvest level were considered conservative due to the large uncertainty associated with population size.
- f) The SWG agreed to make the Executive Summaries from meetings of the group, and some other materials from the meetings and workings of the group, as well as relevant background information, available to the public on existing website(s) in a timely manner.
5. The meeting was attended by observers that made the following comments:
- a) The Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment of the Russian Federation encouraged the SWG to consider input from observers, recognized the Beringia National Park as a valuable partner, and encouraged continued efforts to evaluate the potential impacts of oil and gas development on the AC polar bear population.

- b) The International Fund for Animal Welfare acknowledged the importance of collaboration and joint studies between the U.S. and Russia, and of studies on Wrangel Island.
- c) The North Slope Borough stated that the U.S.-Russia Agreement calls for the use of reliable information, both scientific- and Traditional Ecological Knowledge-based, for making management decisions; recommends that the entire SWG meeting be open to observers; and will provide specific recommendations to the SWG for revisions to the Terms of Reference relating to transparency, scientific rigor, and the level of participation for observers and invited specialists.
- d) The World Wildlife Fund recognized the importance of providing information relevant to SWG proceedings to observers prior to meetings; stated that the highest need is reliable data on the trend and status of the AC population; identified the importance of joint protocols and monitoring to enable adaptive management and continued sustainable harvest; recommended that Russia appoint members to the Conflict Working Group of the Range States.
- e) The Arctic Research and Design Center for Continental Shelf Development expressed appreciation for their participation in the SWG meeting as an observer, and expressed a desire to continue involvement in biological research on the AC population.
- f) The Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunters of Chukotka encouraged invitation of observers representing indigenous communities in Russia to improve their understanding of the workings of the SWG and Commission.

ATTACHMENT 1

List of Attendees at the 5th Annual Meeting of the Scientific Working Group of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission

Scientific Working Group members that attended the meeting

American members

Eric Regehr (American cochair) <eric_regehr@fws.gov> (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Charles Brower <rrbrower@hotmail.com> (Alaska Nanuuq Commission)

Mike Pederson <mike.pederson@north-slope.org> (North Slope Borough)

Ryan Wilson <ryan_r_wilson@fws.gov> (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Hilary Cooley (temporary alternate member, and proposed replacement member, for Todd Atood)
<hilary_cooley@fws.gov> (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Russian members

Stanislav Belikov (Russian cochair) <sbelik35@gmail.com> (All-Russian Research Institute of Nature Protection)

Ilia Mordvinsev <ilia.mordvintsev@gmail.com> (Russian Academy of Sciences)

Nikita Ovsyanikov <nikita_ov@mail.ru> (Independent Biologist)

Scientific Working Group members who were not able to attend the meeting

American members

Karyn Rode <krode@usgs.gov> (U.S. Geological Survey)

Kimberly Titus <kim.titus@alaska.gov> (Alaska Department of Fish and Game)

Todd Atwood <tatwood@usgs.gov> (U.S. Geological Survey)

Russian members

Anatoly Kochnev <kochnev@anadyr.ru> (Chukotka Federal Fisheries Research Institute)

Andrei Boltunov <3438083@mail.ru> (Marine Mammal Council of Russia)

Vladilen Kavry <vancarem@list.ru> (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North)

Vladimir Etylin <etylin.vladimir@gmail.com> (Chukotka Autonomous Region)

Yury Tototto <utototto@mail.ru> (Marine Hunters Union)