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Marine Mammal Bulletin

*Polar Bear, Sea Otter and Walrus
News for Harvest Taggers*

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Tagger Profile



When it comes to making the most of every day in Shishmaref, Davis Sockpick is at the top of the list.

Davis loves to get out and enjoy. If snow is on the ground he is out on his Polaris. If the inlet is ice free, he is out in a boat he most likely made himself. He really enjoys hunting and subsisting from the bounty of marine mammals, ducks, caribou and musk oxen. He is also quite skilled at bringing home the occasional wolverine or wolf from the nearby hills.

Davis has been tagging polar bears for the State and then the USFWS since the 1980s and walrus for the USFWS since 1997.

He is a firm believer in the communication of local knowledge about the health and availability of subsistence animals. He participates in information exchange between hunters, communities and agencies such as the USFWS and the State of Alaska. Davis also keeps excellent records about the use and importance of these animals to the local community.

Thank you Davis for helping to ensure that the Shishmaref subsistence way of life continues for countless future generations!

Davis Sockpick at this year's Fur Rondy.

Brad Bentler / USFWS

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Farewell Old Friend!

By: John Trent



Brad Benter/USFWS

At the age of 81, long-time Cordova sea otter tagger Larry Kritchen departed this life on February 16, 2010.

Mr. Kritchen was a “plank owner,” a founding member, of the MTRP when it began in 1989. He and his wife Kathleen may actually have tagged more subsistence-harvested sea otters for FWS than anyone else in Alaska. Larry Kritchen was a Cordova resident for nearly 60 years, a very fine fur trapper in his own right and an overall great Alaskan. We miss him already!

The MTRP sea otter tagging tradition is now continued in Cordova by Joe Kompkoff.

Tagger’s Notebook

Some Tips to Remember

If you do not tag many animals, mail in your completed white tagging certificate immediately after you tag. This helps Brad and John keep up-to-date records for your area. It also helps us pay you sooner!

If you do a lot of tagging for us, mail in your completed white tag book certificates at least once a month.

Do you need more prepaid mail envelopes? We are glad to send them to you. Enclose a note with your latest batch of white

ANSOCC: The New Sea Otter Co-management Committee

By Doug Burn

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service joined four Alaska Native Organizations to create a new Alaska Native Sea Otter Co-management Committee in Alaska. The four Alaska Native organizations participating in ANSOCC are the Aleut Marine Mammal Commission, Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska and the Sitka Marine Mammal Commission. The remaining regions where sea otters live have been invited and are welcome to join ANSOCC in the future. The service is looking forward to re-establishing ties with sea otter subsistence hunters and working collaboratively on sea otter co-management issues.

Douglas Burn the senior sea otter biologist for USFWS says

that the new sea otter committee will actively work on pressing co-management issues. “These include implementing a recovery plan for the threatened southwest Alaska population of sea otters and addressing competition for shellfish by both people and sea otters in southeastern Alaska.” he said.

Co-management is sometimes called “shared decision making.” It is authorized, in this case, under Section 119 of the Marine Mammals Protection Act. Once ANSOCC is up and running as a co-management committee, annual cooperative agreements will be put in place between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Alaska Native Organizations for the conservation and co-management of the subsistence uses of sea otters.



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certificates that you send in or give us a call at 1-800-363-5148.

Stuff wears out or occasionally gets lost. Do you need a new measuring tape, drill bits or perhaps a drill? Give us a call.

The MTRP harvest information that you provide is critically important for the management of polar bears, walrus and sea otters in Alaska. It is also used to document and protect subsistence hunting needs. This means that the work you do for us is very important and much appreciated!

Village taggers should not tag beach-found ivory or bones for non-Natives. If someone asks you to do this, call John or Brad and we will make arrangements to tag those items at the nearest U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office. Always protect your tags and tagging books by storing them in a safe place.

Stop by for coffee! If you happen to be in Anchorage, give John (786 3815) or Brad (786 3980) a call. We are always glad to see and catch up with our taggers.

Polar Bear Tagging Continues in the Chukchi Sea

By Karyn Rode

For a third spring season biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey are capturing and releasing polar bears in the Chukchi Sea. The work is being done from the Red Dog Mine Port and Kotzebue between March 15 and May 1, 2010.

The purpose of this work is to describe the movement patterns, distribution, habitat use, condition, health and feeding ecology of polar bears in the Chukchi Sea. In 2008 and 2009 biologists captured 79 bears altogether. Now in 2010, 14 female and no male bears are wearing satellite collars that provide locations every two days. Measurements and biological samples are collected from every bear before it is released.

After the 2010 capture season ends, data analysis begins. As the results become available, biologists will share and discuss them with participating nearby communities as well as the Alaska Nanuuq Commission and the new U.S.-Russia Scientific Working Group. Polar bear biologists have worked closely with these organizations to explain the study and to develop “No Fly Zones” intended to avoid disturbing subsistence hunters out on the ice.

Polar bears in the Chukchi Sea face a number of conservation challenges including potentially



USFWS

This 1,260 pound male has a head and neck shaped like a traffic cone, so a satellite collar will not stay on his neck. The big bear provided measurements and samples before he recovered and went his way.

unsustainable levels of human-caused deaths from combined illegal killing in Russia and subsistence harvest in Alaska, sea ice loss due to climate change; and future petroleum exploration.

New Bilateral Polar Bear Commission Begins Harvest Review

By Karyn Rode

The new U.S.-Russia Bilateral Polar Bear Commission met for the first time in Moscow Russia on September 9, 2009. The purpose of the commission is to, “Coordinate measures for the conservation and study of the Alaska-Chukotkan population of polar bears.”

The two American members of the Commission are Charlie Johnson, Executive Director of the Alaska Nanuuq Commission and Geoff Haskett, Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska. There are also two Russian members: Sergey Kavriy representing Chukotkan

aboriginal people in Russia and Amir Khan Amirhanov from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

The four-person Bilateral Commission then appointed a larger Scientific Working Group. The top priority for this working group is to determine how many polar bears can be safely harvested from the Alaska-Chukotkan polar bear population shared by Russia and the United States.

The Scientific Working Group held its first meeting in Anchorage in March 2010. Harvest recommendations for the Alaska-Chukotkan polar bears will then be discussed by the Bilateral Commission when it meets again this-coming June, also in Anchorage.



First Bilateral Polar Bear Commission meeting at Moscow. Standing in the front row center and wearing ties, are three of the four Commission members. They are (L to R) Geoff Haskett, Amir Khan Amirhanov and Sergey Kavriy. Illness prevented Charlie Johnson of Nome from attending.

New Walrus Program Leader

Dr. Jim MacCracken is the new Walrus Program Leader in the Office of Marine Mammal Management.



After a 20 year absence, Jim and his family are glad to be back in Alaska. Jim’s wife, Maureen, has relatives from the Bethel area (grandmother) and her father still lives in his homestead cabin along the Tanana River across from Fairbanks. They had previously lived in Palmer, Eagle River, Fairbanks, and Cordova. While in Fairbanks, they often helped Maureen’s Father with subsistence hunting and fishing, and Jim took over his trap line on the Tannana Flats for several winters.

Jim has over 30 years experience in wildlife and fish research and

management. He has worked for state and federal agencies, universities, and private corporations.

“I remember one of my professors at Colorado State University saying that one of the five keys to a good life was having a wide range of experiences, both professionally and personally”, said Jim. “I have been able to do that professionally, not only with a variety of organizations, but also with the species and their habitats that I have worked on, ranging from stream insects, to moose, and now walrus.”

“I have a lot to learn about walrus, walrus hunting and co-management with the Native communities, and I’m looking forward to that,” Jim MacCracken observed.

Walrus Listing Progress Report

By Jim MacCracken

In the last issue of the *Marine Mammal Bulletin* (Fall 2009) we noted that the Service was well into the 60-day public comment period that closed November 9, 2009. We received numerous comments from a variety of people and organizations, including each member-village of the Eskimo Walrus Commission (EWC) about whether to list Pacific walrus as “Threatened” or “Endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Overall, comments ranged from pleas to list walrus as endangered to those suggesting that listing was not needed. The comments from the EWC villages did not directly address whether walrus should be listed or

not, but did comment on whether hunters were seeing more or fewer walrus each year. Most villages reported seeing the same or more, with a few seeing less, but those observations were very dependent on ice conditions. The Service will be making a

decision by September 10, 2010 about whether to list walrus under the ESA. The Service is currently developing a status review that will contain a summary of all the information on walrus, including public comments that will be used in making a listing decision.

The status review and the listing recommendation will be published in the Federal Register. You can keep track of this process by visiting <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/wmain.htm>, or you can call our Marine Mammals Management Office at 907/786 3800 or 800/362 5148.



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129,000 Walrus in 2006

By Jim MacCracken

Last January the Service announced the results of the walrus population estimate that it did in 2006. Lead Walrus Program Biologist Jim MacCracken offers his thoughts on what this estimate may really mean

Pacific walrus are hard to count. They can be found throughout an extremely large area, they move around a lot, they're often under water, and weather can ground airplanes and make it hard to see. Because of these things, it is impossible to count each and every walrus.

In the 2006 survey we tried to correct for these problems by counting smaller areas that were similar to areas not counted, by taking into account animals that were underwater, and by solving some "detectability" problems with measurements of the heat given off by walrus hauled out on the ice. Doing all this resulted

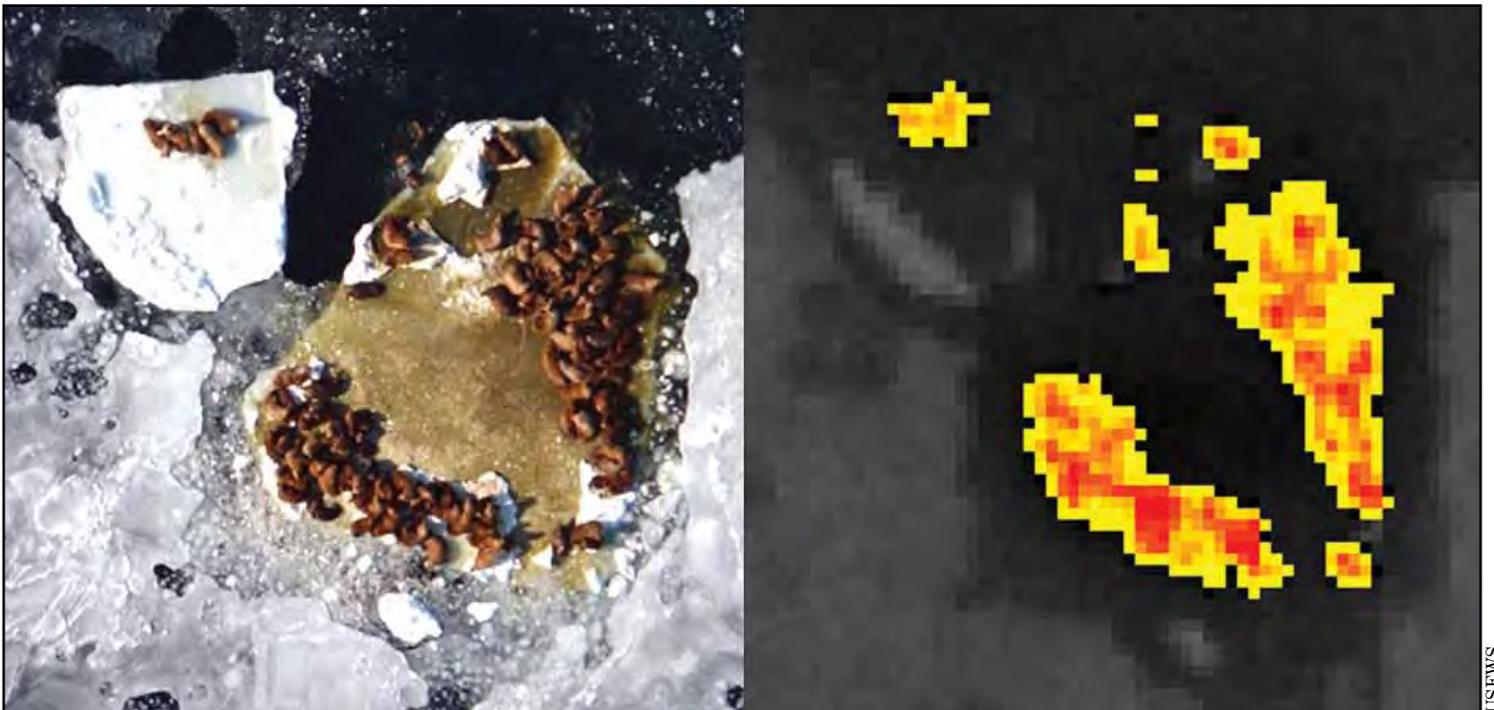
in an estimate of 129,000 walrus. However, this is a minimum number for several reasons.

Most importantly, the weather prevented counting walrus in a large area of Bristol Bay, where lots of walrus were spotted on the way home! In addition, we have not yet taken into account areas not surveyed within the larger area where walrus were counted, two things that could easily double the number.

Because the population number is based on a sample and also because it estimated numbers of walrus in the water and those hard to see on the ice--how close it is to the true number is not known. One way to judge any number that came from a sample is to calculate a confidence interval. The confidence interval for the 2006 survey was roughly 55,000 to 500,000 animals, a very large range!

What this means is that there are problems in counting walrus that we did not consider and may be able to correct in the future, that walrus behavior and their environment may simply not allow for a good count, and that it will take a very large change in the walrus population before we can say that it is declining or increasing based on similar surveys in the future.

We also learned several valuable lessons and made several technological advances that will be important in the future. There currently is a lot of interest among U.S. and Russian walrus biologists in applying that information to conducting fall surveys when most walrus are using land haul outs. Surveys in the fall when walrus are concentrated along the coast have several advantages, but also several challenges. Ideas from both Alaskan and Russian hunters can help to overcome some of these challenges.



Walrus were both digitally photographed and detected by their body heat.

USFWS

Russians Meet with North Slope Villages

By: Jessica Carie

In early February 2010, Joel Garlich-Miller and Jessica Carie in the Office of Marine Mammals Management organized community meetings in Point Hope, Point Lay, Wainwright, and Barrow. Four Russians and seven U.S scientists and translators traveled together to the villages.

The tour provided the opportunity for discussions between coastal Chukchi Sea village residents from both Chukotka, Russia and Alaska about emerging walrus and polar bear conservation and management issues.

The exchange was supported by the FWS, World Wildlife Fund and the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management. Special thanks go to Margaret Williams and Geoff York at the World Wildlife Fund and to Michael Pederson, North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management.

In the North, everyone loves a maktak (muktuk) feast (Wainwright).
Jessica Carie/USFWS



The Barrow audience listens and comments.

Jessica Carie/USFWS



Exchanging marine mammal conservation ideas in Barrow.

Jessica Carie/USFWS



For both Barrow hosts and Russian guests, it's cold!

Jessica Carie/USFWS

Russian biologist Anatoly Kochnev has observed walruses and polar bears in Chukotka for many years.

Jessica Carie/USFWS



Sundance: celebrating the return of the sun at Barrow.

WWF Arctic Program

Chukotkan hunters dance to the beat of Wainwright drums.

Jessica Carie/USFWS



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How Many Did You Catch?

*Total Reported Alaska Subsistence Harvests for the Last Five Years***

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	5-yr Avg.
Northern Sea Otter	907	710	704	658	866	769
Pacific Walrus	1197	1148	1829	1277	1643	1419
Polar Bear	58	73	54	29	20	47

**These are harvest statistics from your tagging certificates.

For further information, contact:
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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://alaska.fws.gov>

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