

Report of the Fourth Meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission

25-27 June 2012

Anchorage, Alaska U.S.A

Chaired by Geoffrey Haskett (Regional Director, Alaska Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The fourth meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission (hereafter “Commission”) took place on 25-27 June, 2012 in Anchorage, Alaska, USA. The Commission meeting was attended by all four members of the Commission (Geoffrey Haskett, Charlie Brower, Amirkhan Amirkhanov, and Sergei Kavry and their respective delegates (Annex 1). 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* (hereafter the “Agreement”).

Monday, 25 June 2012

Commissioner Haskett opened the meeting by welcoming the Russian and American attendees and reaffirming the importance of the Agreement to the conservation of the Alaska-Chukotka (AC) polar bear population. He paid tribute to Commissioner Charlie Johnson (09 December 1939 – 13 April 2012). He recognized the progress made under the Agreement and expressed confidence that, by working together, this will continue into the future. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Alaska Nanuuq Commission (ANC) continue to develop a shared harvest management plan, and will begin phased implementation in January 2013 to begin with outreach in Alaskan communities.

Commissioner Amirkhanov affirmed the importance of working together and sharing information for the long-term management of the AC population. He acknowledged the potential for increasing anthropogenic stresses on the ecosystem and assured that Russia is taking all possible measures to protect polar bears. He emphasized that current achievements lay the foundation for future work. He stated that the Chukotka Autonomous Region government has done a lot of work towards implementing the Agreement.

Commissioner Brower welcomed the Russian delegation, and emphasized the importance of education for Native peoples about the Agreement, and education for others about the Native traditional way of life.

Commissioner Kavry expressed hope of achieving progress during the meeting that will benefit the Native people of Chukotka, recognized the progress that has been made to minimize human-bear conflicts, and expressed the need for future work on this topic.

Agenda Item: Commemoration for Commissioner Charlie Johnson

The four Commissioners and delegates from the U.S. and Russia paid tribute to Commissioner Charlie Johnson (09 December 1939 – 13 April 2012; Annex 2).

Agenda Item: Discussion of meeting goals and expected outcomes

Commissioners agreed to a final agenda with minor modifications.

Commissioner Haskett indicated that the main goal of the meeting is to adopt a Multiyear Quota System (MQS). A multiyear system represents a valid biological approach that offers management benefits. Commissioner Haskett noted other goals to be discussed at the meeting include the setting of harvest seasons, development of a joint website for the Commission, and opportunities to improve scientific collaboration between the U.S. and Russia.

Commissioner Amirkhanov acknowledged the value of a MQS and the success of similar systems for the management of other species. Such a system is logical for harvest management and conservation, and recognizes the interests of Native peoples.

Commissioners Brower and Kavry indicated support for the proposed MQS.

Agenda Item: Report on Scientific Working Group high-priority studies, bilateral coordination and support

The cochairs of the Scientific Working Group (SWG; Terry DeBruyn and Stanislav Belikov) presented a joint study plan developed by the SWG in March 2012 (Annex 3). This plan identifies research objectives and information needs for the management and conservation of the AC population, and presents a prioritized list of studies. The cochairs recognized the need for research collaboration between the U.S. and Russia, and requested that the Commission take steps to facilitate the transfer of funds, samples, and personnel between countries.

Stanislav Belikov emphasized the importance of research for the development of sound and defensible conservation strategies, and identified the need for funded studies on the Russian side, particularly on the Chukotkan coast and Wrangel Island. In 2011, the Chukotka Autonomous Region government adopted a plan for implementation of priority measures for polar bear conservation in Chukotka through 2020.

The Commission recognized the SWG's general concerns regarding the importance of collaboration between the U.S. and Russia on research for the AC population. Commissioners Amirkhanov and Haskett requested that the SWG provide the Commission with specific matters that could be facilitated by the Commissioners in the future.

Agenda Item: Presentation of legal analysis for the U.S. multiyear quota system

Fatima Ahmad reviewed sections of the Agreement relevant for establishing the parameters of a multiyear quota system, specifically: (1) Article 8(7)(c); (2) the definition of "sustainable harvest level" in Article 1; (3) Article 8(7)(b); (4) Article 8(3); and (5) Article 9.

Agenda Item: Presentation of research and monitoring in the U.S.

Eric Regehr and Karyn Rode presented an overview of current and future capture-based research in the U.S. portion of the Chukchi Sea, including results from an analysis of body condition, reproduction, and nutritional ecology. The USFWS has captured and released 192 polar bears from 2008-2011 for scientific study, including collection of biological samples and application of radiotelemetry devices. No fieldwork was performed in 2012 to allow for data analysis, and the project will resume in 2013 and continue into the future. Three main lines of investigation are being pursued to provide information to improve the conservation and management of the AC population: (1) body condition and nutritional ecology; (2) habitat modeling and distribution; and (3) demography and study design. The results from this study are critical to understanding the feasibility of estimating these parameters in the future.

Analyses of body condition and nutritional ecology suggest that polar bears captured from 2008-2011 were in good body condition and exhibited high indices of recruitment, compared to historical studies in the Chukchi Sea region, and to polar bear populations in other regions. This evidence of productivity was observed despite significant declines in sea ice habitat in the past 20 years. Results must be interpreted with caution because they represent a relatively small window in time and space.

Agenda Item: Presentation of research and monitoring in Russia

S. Belikov summarized polar bear research and monitoring on Wrangel Island. The number of bears using Wrangel Island during the summer and autumn appears to have increased in the last 10-15 years, with approximately 200 bears on average and a maximum of 600. The body condition and recruitment of these bears varies from year to year, but does not appear to have declined.

Commissioner Amirkhanov emphasized the importance of providing written reports of research, and the need for information from scientific research to be made available to all stakeholders. Commissioner Kavry commented that scientific studies need to be transparent.

Tuesday, June 26, 2012

Agenda Item: Briefing by chairs of the Scientific Working Group on meeting outcomes

Scientific Working Group cochairs (Terry DeBruyn and Stanislav Belikov) provided the Executive Summary of 3rd Scientific Working Group meeting held in Anchorage in March 2012. Twelve of the members of the working group including both cochairs, as well as invited specialists and observers attended the meeting. The SWG reviewed new research findings and prepared recommendations for the Commission on harvest levels, country-specific harvest seasons, a joint U.S.-Russia study plan, and an outreach document for the Commission website. The SWG also developed operating guidelines, including procedures for alternate or replacement members, and recognized the need to explain and adhere to the guidelines at future meetings.

The SWG recognized that new biological information considered at its March 2012 meeting did not suggest the need to change the sustainable harvest level for polar bears from the AC population.

The SWG recommended country-specific harvest seasons.

The SWG recommended that the MQS included in the draft U.S. Shared Harvest Management Plan represents a valid and biologically sound method for implementing the quota. When a regulated harvest is implemented in the U.S., the SWG will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of this quota system.

Agenda Item: Presentation of Scientific Working Group analysis of sustainable harvest level and multi-year quota system

Eric Regehr and Karyn Rode provided a perspective on findings from 2008-2011 research, relative to harvest levels. High body condition and recruitment of study animals suggest that the AC population is currently capable of increasing under natural conditions, and therefore supporting a sustainable harvest in the short term. Continued monitoring is essential. The primary long-term conservation concern for polar bears is sea ice loss. The scientific community acknowledges that the response of polar bears to sea ice loss will vary in time and space. Observations of productivity for the AC population are not inconsistent with long-term concerns. These research findings are consistent with the assumptions that were made by the SWG in 2010 when evaluating sustainable harvest levels.

Eric Regehr presented an evaluation by the SWG of the biological effects of implementing a harvest according to the MQS included in the draft U.S. Shared Harvest Management Plan. Conceptually this evaluation applied to harvest in the U.S. only. The MQS included the general features presented at the 2011 meeting of the Commission: adherence to a sustainable harvest level over a five-year period, the use of harvest debits and credits subject to caveats, and provisions for annual taking limits. Population models suggested that even if bears were harvested as early as possible under the MQS, it would likely not have a negative effect on the population, compared to harvest under an annual quota system. The MQS is also likely to improve the ability of hunters to approach the five-year sustainable harvest level, given variation in the availability of polar bears to hunters. This MQS—or any similar system—is a tool to be implemented as part of a broader infrastructure for harvest management, and does not preclude annual review of harvest by the SWG as new information becomes available. The SWG did not evaluate how a MQS would be applied to the U.S. and Russia concurrently, and further consideration is warranted on this subject.

Agenda Item: Discussion of Scientific Working Group outcomes and Commission action on establishing shared allowable quota, harvest seasons, and multiyear quota

Douglas Vincent-Lang spoke in support of the MQS and noted the successful application of similar systems for harvest management of bears and other species.

The ability of a MQS to account for unexpected take in one year by lowering the subsequent annual sustainable harvest level in the following year was discussed as providing conservation benefits for harvest management, noting that annual quota systems lack a similar mechanism to maintain harvest below a sustainable level over a multiyear period.

Commissioner Amirkhanov suggested that using a five-year quota system with the sustainable harvest recommendations by the SWG would result in a five-year sustainable harvest level of up to 145 bears—of which no more than one third will be female—for each country, and expressed support for the system. A MQS represents another step on the gradual path to implementation of the quota for subsistence harvest. Russia hopes to follow the U.S. example of co-management for polar bears.

The importance to conservation of protecting female polar bears was discussed.

Agenda Item: Presentation of U.S. harvest in the previous year and the U.S. Shared Harvest Management Plan and implementation

Terry DeBruyn described harvest management in the U.S. and noted the successes and benefits that have resulted from co-management with the Alaska Nanuuq Commission (ANC). In the U.S. it is estimated that 85-95% of harvested polar bears are tagged within 30 days, and this number is likely to approach 100% when the U.S. Shared Harvest Management plan is fully implemented. U.S. harvest for the AC population varies from year to year. Updated harvest numbers were provided to the U.S. portion of the Chukchi Sea represented by the Agreement: in 2011 there was a total harvest of 39 bears harvested including 28 males, 9 females, and 2 bears of unknown sex. In 2012 through mid-June,

44 polar bears were harvested including 22 males, 10 females, and 12 bears for which sex has yet to be determined.

Jack Omelak described work of the ANC and its cooperative agreement with the USFWS. A workable Shared Harvest Management Plan is being developed with the cooperation of villages and following sound conservation practices. It is crucial that hunters have meaningful input into this process.

Agenda Item: Presentation on regulation authority for implementation of U.S. Shared Harvest Management Plan

Michael Young described the role of the Commission in setting the sustainable harvest level, the annual sustainable harvest level, and the annual taking limits and discussed how the U.S. will implement the U.S. allocation of the annual taking limits. The U.S. implemented the Agreement legislatively in Title 5 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. See 16 U.S.C. 1423 et seq. Under 16 U.S.C. 1423a, any taking in violation of the Agreement or any annual taking limit or other restriction on the taking of polar bears that is adopted by the Commission pursuant to the Agreement is prohibited. The USFWS will work with the Alaska Nanuuq Commission to ensure self-governance and co-management.

Under 16 U.S.C. 1423b(d), the ANC will take the first step in implementation by working with individual villages to develop ordinances applicable to individual members, and the USFWS will follow with publication in the Federal Register of ANC regulations concerning the take restrictions. This is a collaborative rulemaking effort involving close cooperation between the USFWS and ANC.

Agenda Item: Presentation from Russian harvest in the previous year and the Russian Harvest Management Plan and implementation

Commissioner Amirkhanov stated that Russia does not allow harvest of polar bears, with some legal exceptions for cultural, education, scientific purposes, and response to threats of human life. In addition there is special wording about aboriginal harvest.

Commissioner Kavry addressed human-bear conflicts and the work of the Native Peoples of Chukotka to establish a bear patrol and eliminate human-bear conflicts. In 2011, the Chukotka Autonomous Region government adopted a plan for implementation of priority measures for polar bear conservation in Chukotka through 2020.

Agenda Item: Presentation on plan for minimizing human-caused mortality in the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population

Jack Omelak reported on long-term strategies by the ANC to minimize human-caused mortality of polar bears. This involves a detailed analysis of past and current actions, to determine the most effective path forward. A study of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in western Alaska has been completed in collaboration with USFWS and others. This provides fundamental information about polar bears and their relationships to humans.

Agenda Item: Presentation on plan for minimizing human-caused mortality in the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population

Yuri Tototto and Sergei Kavry presented information on their approach involving villagers in the region to gather traditional ecological knowledge about human-caused mortality and gain an understanding of the relationship between man and the animal. The Chukotka Autonomous Region government has approved an Act on the implementation of the Agreement, and has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Union of Marine Mammal Hunters.

Agenda Item: Discussion of the Joint Outreach Strategy: Commission website, Scientific Working Group outreach document, re-designation of points of contact, updates on progress

Terry DeBruyn noted the Commission had adopted an outreach strategy at a previous meeting. The USFWS prepared and posted documents on the USFWS web site regarding the Commission. Progress has been made on developing a joint Commission web site including a proposed commission logo designed by Vladilen Kavry and a draft template of the information to be included on the website. A draft outreach website that furthers the goals of the Commission has been developed. The website will be kept simple to allow access by people in remote villages with a slow Internet connection.

Igor Mikhno acknowledged the need for a process by which documents get agreed upon for posting on the website. He suggested that documents get submitted to Terry and that he seek approval from the Commissioners prior to posting. Commissioner Amir Khanov suggested that the website provide a space for comments from the public and specialists to be posted that would allow dialogue. Commissioner Haskett recommended that the outreach group report back to the Commission with suggestions as to the parameters of such a discussion space.

Actions voted on by the Commission

Action 1: The Commissioners approved the continued development of the Commission website using the format and outline provided.

Action 2: The Commission recommended that the country-specific harvest seasons, as recommended by the Scientific Work Group, be implemented as part of country-specific harvest management plans, when such plans are put in place. It was proposed that the accounting or reporting of harvest occur on a calendar year basis.

Action 3: Based on the recommendation of the SWG, the Commission agreed that no change is necessary to the sustainable harvest level identified in 2010. The Commission adopted a five-year sustainable harvest level of 290 (i.e., 58×5), with no more than one third as female, with the requirements that the five-year sustainable harvest level be allocated over the five-year period using methods recognized by the Scientific Working Group as biologically sound, and that these methods include the identification of annual sustainable harvest levels, for consideration by the Commission in setting annual taking limits.

Wednesday, June 27, 2012

Agenda Item: Meeting opening and recap from previous day

Igor Mikhno and Scott Schliebe were requested to develop amendments to the operating procedures of the Commission prior to the next annual meeting.

Agenda Item: Discussion on next steps for continued conservation and management of the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population; consideration of development of a Russia-U.S. Polar Bear Management Plan

Terry DeBruyn noted that development of a conservation management plan may not be a difficult task because both countries are preparing plans for the Range States organization. Commissioner Amirkhanov thought that preparation of a conservation plan is important. The Commission recommended that the SWG develop a draft conservation management plan for discussion at the next Commission meeting.

Eduard Zdor presented the preliminary results of a two-year social polling conducted jointly with World Wildlife Fund. The main purpose of the study was to understand the level of interaction of local hunters with polar bears in eastern Chukotka.

Agenda Item: The five-year quota system was recommended and approved by the Commission. The resolution stated the following:

Recognizing that on 26 June 2012 the Commission adopted the SWG's recommendation of a sustainable harvest level over a five-year period of 290 polar bears, of which no more than one third will be female. The Commission now endorses the biologically sound methods established by the SWG for identifying the annual sustainable harvest levels for each year within the five-year period. The MQS will be applied to female and total bears. Cumulative annual sustainable harvest levels over the five-year period will not exceed the five-year sustainable harvest level. This system anticipates annual review as new information becomes available. We anticipate implementing the MQS in 2014, conditional upon completion of outreach and full coordination with the ANC and other stakeholders.

Calculations for the MQS are defined as follows:

- $L_j = C_j \times 1.25$, where L_j is the recommended annual sustainable harvest level for year j
- $C_j = R_j /$ the number of years remaining in the five year period, where C_j is the average number of credits remaining per year within the five-year period, at the beginning of year j .
- and R_j is the number of credits remaining in the five-year period at the beginning of year j .

Agenda Item: Informational items

The following informational presentations were made without need for decision.

- 1) Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
- 2) Polar Bear Range States
- 3) Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation and Management of Shared Polar Bear Populations (U.S. and Canada)
- 4) Inupiat-Inuvialuit Polar Bear Agreement presented by Taqulik Hepa, Director Department of Wildlife Management, North Slope Borough.

Agenda Item: Location of the next Commission meeting

The 2013 annual meeting of the Commission will be held in St. Petersburg, Russia.

**Commission members of the Russian
Federation**

Amirkhan Amirkhanov



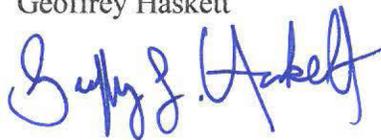
Sergey Kavry



Date: 27 June 2012

**Commission members of the United
States of America**

Geoffrey Haskett



Charles Brower

