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If walrus haul-out, eliminating disturbance is essential

The Native Village of Point Lay, U.S. Geological Survey, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a joint announcement today alerting media and the public that in the event walrus haulout on the coastal islands near the village of Point Lay, the community and the walrus need space to reduce disturbance and possible trampling of animals.

“The walrus haulout event receives worldwide attention and many media people contact our Tribal Government asking to come and film the walrus. The Native Village of Point Lay does not have the capacity to answer media requests, and we respectfully ask members of the media, tourists and other organizations to refrain from visiting our community to film the animals or sightsee,” said Leo Ferreira III, Point Lay Tribal Council President. “We do not believe that these sorts of visits are in the best interest of the walrus and they do not align with the haulout protection role we have developed and measures we set in place to prevent disturbances.”

Agency partners will work with Native Village of Point Lay to provide timely information to the media as the situation develops.

Researchers with USGS, NOAA, and USFWS, and the residents of Point Lay stressed that they don't know if and when a haulout may occur, but since 2007 a consistent pattern of response to the loss of ice in the Chukchi Sea has emerged: walrus females and calves are coming ashore in the late summer/early fall in large numbers near the community.

“Many walrus seem to prefer the barrier islands just north of the Native Village of Point Lay to haulout, and the site has been occupied by as many as 20,000 to 40,000 animals at its peak,” said Jim MacCracken, Supervisory Wildlife Biologist with the USFWS.

Walrus are easily disturbed when hauled out on land, which can lead to large stampedes into the water that may injure and kill some animals. Yearlings and calves are particularly vulnerable. Last year, it was estimated that 60 young walrus were killed because of the sheer number of animals gathered together.

Large predators, humans and their machines can disturb the walrus.

“The Native Village of Point Lay has taken a proactive role in the stewardship of walrus haulouts near our community,” Ferreira said. “We have reduced or redirected our resident hunters from coming near the haulout when occupied by large numbers. Our community members are involved in the walrus satellite tagging project, haulout monitoring and carcass surveys, and camera towers. In past years we have contacted local airlines to reroute flights in and out of our community.”

Aircraft overflights are of particular concern, and the USFWS and Native Village of Point Lay have taken steps to keep those disturbances to a minimum including working with the Federal Aviation Administration to issue notices and guidelines to pilots. In the event of a large haulout, partners may ask the FAA to issue temporary flight restrictions within the vicinity of the haulout.

Federal scientists who annually conduct aerial surveys of marine mammals in the Arctic adhere to strict guidelines for survey overflights, especially where walruses are concerned.

“When conducting our aerial surveys in the northeastern Chukchi Sea, we stay over water both for passing and circling. If we cannot maintain appropriate altitude due to weather, then we increase our lateral distance by up to five nautical miles,” said Megan Ferguson, lead NOAA Fisheries scientist for the annual Aerial Survey of Arctic Marine Mammals, a project funded and co-managed by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. “We also exercise great care near any cliffs because the topography may amplify noise from the plane.”

Pacific walruses have always used coastal haulouts for resting during the fall southward migration. Adult males which are better suited to spending long periods in ice free waters routinely use coastal haulouts along the Bering Sea in both Russia and the United States during the summer months. However, females and young prefer to rest on ice floes until they begin to migrate back to the Bering Sea for the winter. Ice floes provide protection from predators, allow walrus to haul out in smaller groups, and provide easy access to feeding areas below.

“We can prevent walrus disturbance and many trampling deaths,” Ferreira said, “but everyone needs to listen and pay attention to help the walrus.”

For more information regarding walrus and walrus research visit:

USFWS: <http://www.fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/mmm/walrus/wmain.htm>

USGS: <http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/walrus/index.html>

For updates on NOAA’s aerial surveys of Arctic marine mammals, visit:

<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/cetacean/bwasp/index.php>