

**AGENDA B-5
OCTOBER 2007**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
October 3, 2007

Northern Sea Otter: The southwest Alaska sea otter recovery team (SWAKSORT) will be meeting again in Anchorage on October 16-18, 2007. Under the April 2007 settlement with the Center for Biological Diversity the Service will either propose critical habitat or make a "not prudent" finding regarding critical habitat by November 30, 2007. The Service will also publish a Final Rule by October 1, 2009. The Team's webpage is: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/seaotters/recovery.htm>

In addition, Service conducted some skiff-based surveys in the western and central Aleutians, and the numbers did not show evidence of continued population declines.

Short-tailed Albatross: The Service purchased 23 satellite transmitters for future deployment on short-tailed albatrosses, primarily on translocated chicks and control chicks. This represents partial fulfillment of the Service's match obligation for NPRB study 0723, the short-tailed albatross chick translocation study.

We continue to get intermittent satellite signals from a tag that was attached to a black-footed albatross, but has washed up in the south side of Atka Island. There is a \$100 reward for anyone who finds it.

Endangered Species Act Consultation: On July 20, 2007, Service staff (Greg Balogh and Ellen Lance) and U.S. Coast Guard staff (Commander Sandra Selman and Jack Hug) met to discuss potential ESA Section 7 consultation topics in Alaska. Topics included: 1) Tanker and Cargo Vessel traffic in Alaska EEZ, especially where North Asian Great Circle Route goes through Unimak Pass; 2) Potential for launching an in-line oil/water separator give-away program to vessels in the Aleutians; 3) streamlining consultations for at-sea and on-land homeland security exercises; 4) Coast Guard Communication tower construction and operation; and 5) ice breaker cruises, especially those that are near wintering eiders.

Bering Sea Research Needs: Based on the information needs for threatened spectacled eiders discussed with the Council at the past several meetings, we are developing proposals for funding both Jim Lovvorn's (University of Wyoming) analysis of existing data: "Modeling effects of bottom trawling on benthic food webs and threatened eiders"; and Margaret Petersen and Bill Larned's study "Distribution and habitat use of spectacled eiders during winter in the Bering and Chukchi Seas". Investigators will be seeking funding for these projects from NPRB.

The distribution and habitat use study will require additional funding, and we are already seeking other partners, including oil companies, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, universities and federal agencies. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S.

Geological Survey and Bureau of Land Management have already contributed substantial support by providing most of the satellite transmitters for the project.

Seabird Monitoring: Regarding the NPRB studies – The Service’s Migratory Birds Program, Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and Oregon State University teamed up on proposed seabird projects as part of a NOAA-led ecosystem study for NPRB's Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Program. The ecosystem project was approved, and will fund three years of field work (2008-2010) and two years of analysis and writing. We are currently revising proposed work plans and budgets in accordance with reviewer's recommendations, and coordinating with over 70 Principle Investigators. A major addition is a 'Patch Dynamics Study', with fine scale studies focused around the Pribilof Islands. For this component, the Service and OSU are coordinating with PI Andrew Trites (University of British Columbia) and Alexander Kitaysky (University of Alaska Fairbanks). The Service’s seabird projects will include three sub-components: 1) at sea surveys, which will examine broad-scale distribution and abundance surveys in conjunction with NOAA fisheries and oceanographic surveys, and fine-scale surveys around the Pribilofs; 2) telemetry studies (Pribilofs) to examine foraging ranges, locations, and trip durations of breeding murres and kittiwakes; and 3) colony-based monitoring of diet, nutritional stress, and productivity of murres and kittiwakes (with UAF focusing on the nutritional stress aspects). The focus on the Pribilofs will be to examine possible reasons for different seabird population trends between St. Paul (negative trends) and St. George (stable) islands. The main hypothesis is that St. Paul birds are more stressed because they must fly farther to the shelf edge and/or are more affected by changes in spring ice conditions, resulting in population declines at St. Paul. Thus the island comparison provides a way to look at mechanisms that may affect top predators as warming trends continue.

The Service’s at-sea program continues to monitor marine bird distribution and relative abundance throughout the Bering Sea. Our cooperators include NOAA-Fisheries stock assessment research vessels, and National Science Foundation-sponsored research on the Bering Sea (BEST, BASIS, SBI (shelf-basin interaction)). We are also working with the GLOBEC project in the Gulf of Alaska and the Alaska Maritime Refuge around the Aleutian Islands.

Yukon River Salmon Management: Although Yukon River salmon returns have steadily improved since the poor salmon returns of 1998 through 2002, Yukon River Chinook salmon remain identified by the State Board of Fisheries as a stock of yield concern and the Chinook and fall chum salmon returns in 2007 were considerably less than expected. It was expected that the Canadian border mark-recapture passage estimate would be at least 45,500 Chinook salmon, based on the U.S./Canada Panel established escapement goal and the harvest sharing arrangement contained in the U.S./Canada Yukon River Salmon Agreement. There was a shortfall in the Chinook salmon run to Canada with an estimated Canadian border passage of 23,000 this year.

The Service is concerned about high levels of bycatch of chum and Chinook salmon in the groundfish fisheries because of the increased difficulty for meeting salmon spawning escapement goals and the increased difficulty of federally qualified subsistence users to

meet their harvest goals. Managers have heard that subsistence fishers had to work harder than usual this year to achieve subsistence harvest goals for Chinook salmon and in some cases may not have achieved their goals. Yukon River subsistence fishermen have been restricted early in the fishing season since 2001 via a "windowed" subsistence fishing schedule due to salmon return run strength uncertainty. When escapements are met and subsistence harvests are not restricted, bycatch of salmon in the groundfish fisheries is an allocation issue that is best addressed by NOAA Fisheries and ADF&G, through the Council.

M/V *Selendang Ayu*: On September 22, the owners of the M/V *Selendang Ayu* – IMC Shipping Co. Pte. Ltd. (IMC) of Singapore -- plead guilty to violations of the Refuse Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act. As part of the plea agreement, IMC agreed to pay a criminal penalty of \$10 million dollars and to serve three years probation. Of the \$10 million penalty, \$3 million will go to the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation for "the purpose of conducting an Aleutian Islands risk assessment of shipping hazards for that area as well as projects identified by the risk assessment." Another \$1 million has been designated for the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. IMC's probation will include review of engine maintenance and performance of the IMC fleet.

Meanwhile, federal and state trustee agencies – led by the Service -- are continuing their efforts towards assessment and restoration of injured natural resources and services. The trustees issued a notice in March that they intended to conduct a full assessment and restoration effort in this matter. And consistent with Oil Pollution Act regulations, they have initiated a cooperative assessment effort with representatives from IMC and its insurer, The Swedish Club. Questions can be directed to Jenifer Kohout, USFWS, at (907) 786-3687 or Jenifer_Kohout@fws.gov.

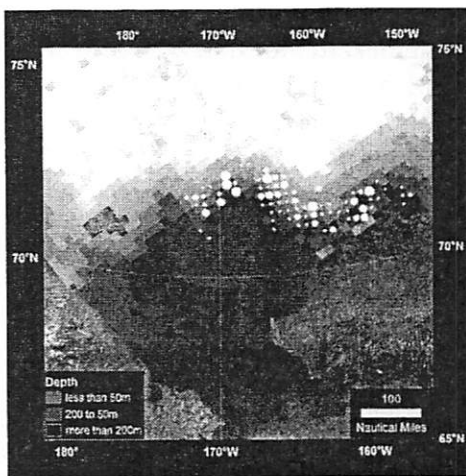
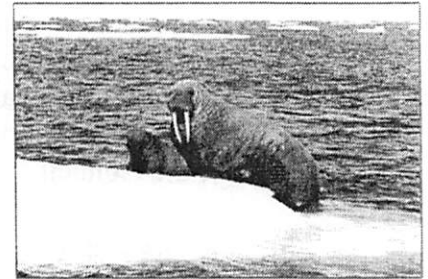
Attachments

WALRUSES AND A CHANGING ARCTIC

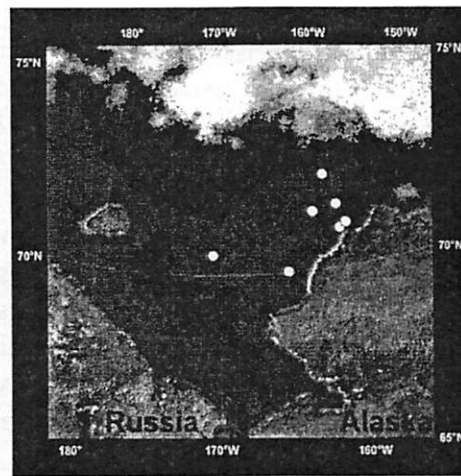
Female walrus use sea ice to rest and nurse their young. They rely on the close proximity of sea ice to the continental shelf where their benthic prey is abundant and accessible to shallow foraging.

Sea ice is retreating more quickly in late spring, and is less extensive over the shelf in summer and early fall, than in previous years. This has resulted in more rapid northward migration of walrus and decreased sea ice habitat within their summer foraging range.

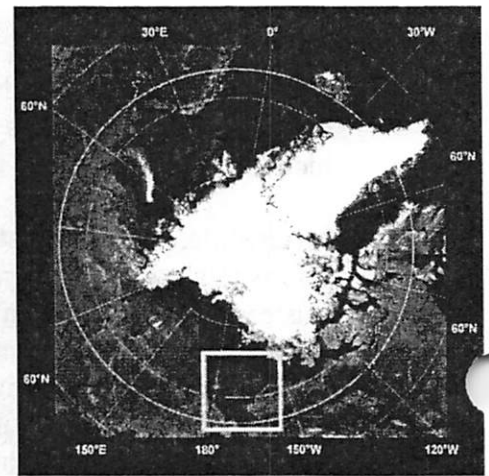
Walrus have become less accessible to Alaska Native subsistence hunting, and anecdotal information suggests that female walrus and calves are responding to decreased sea ice by increasing their use of land haul-outs in Russia, leading to more costly foraging energetics and increased calf mortality.



Distribution of walrus in sea ice habitat in September 1980 (aerial survey).



Distribution of radio-tagged walrus in much reduced sea ice habitat in July 2007.



Ice has receded in 2007 to the lowest extent on record.

Research Needs:

A better understanding of changing walrus distributions and foraging behavior relative to sea ice conditions

- Increase efforts to track walrus and foraging behavior
- Develop improved statistical modeling and testing of walrus telemetry location data

Insights into likely population responses to altered walrus distributions and foraging strategies

- Improve measures of population condition from subsistence harvests
- Develop models of walrus bioenergetics

Improved understanding of ice dynamics in the Chukchi Sea

- Determine the origin and dynamics of ice remnants in northeastern Chukchi Sea
- Quantify ice persistence over the Chukchi shelf
- Quantify accessibility of ice within walrus subsistence hunting zones

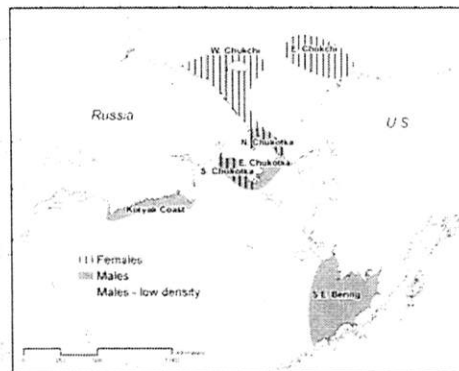
Alaska Science Center contact:

Karen Oakley, MFEB Branch Chief, 907-786-3579, karen_oakley@usgs.gov

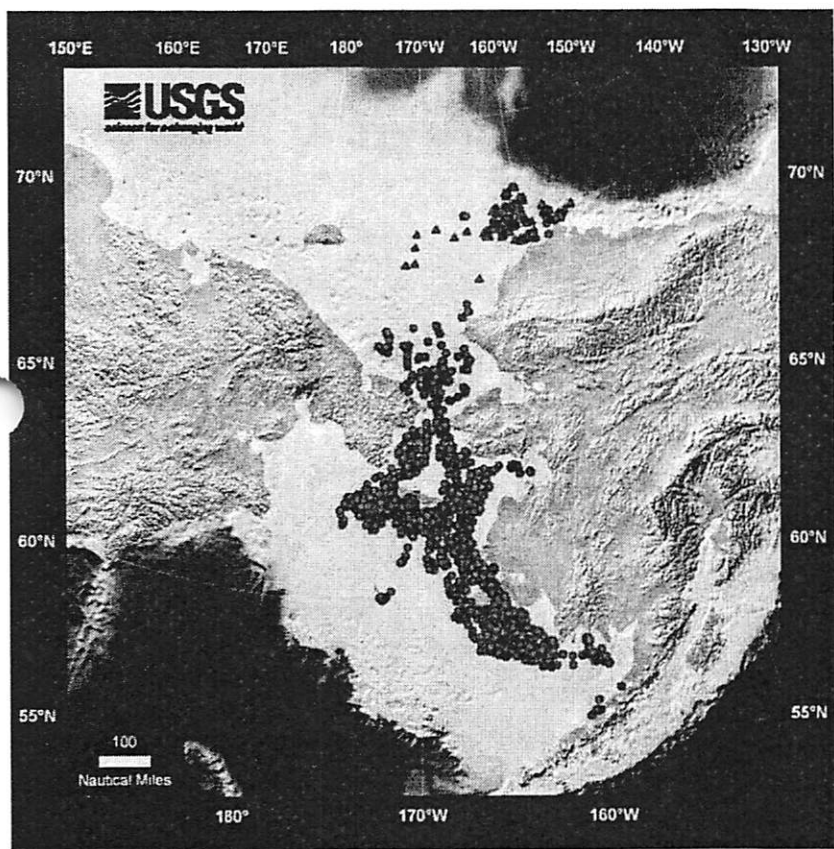
Chad Jay, Walrus Project Leader, 907-786-7414, chad_jay@usgs.gov

PACIFIC WALRUS

virtually the entire Pacific walrus population is found in the Bering Sea during the winter breeding period. Walrus depend on sea ice or land to haul-out to rest, molt, and give birth. As ice retreats northward into the Chukchi Sea, adult males tend to move to land haul-outs in Russia and Alaska, while females and young remain in close proximity to the ice. Walrus feed on benthic invertebrates, mainly clams, on the shallow continental shelf.

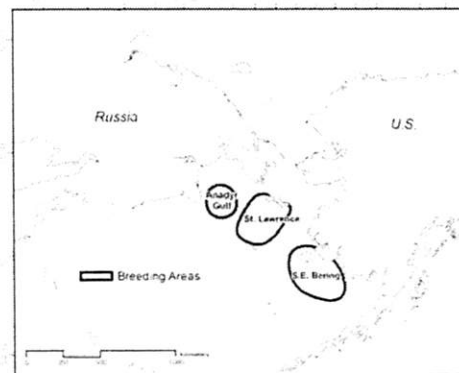


Approximate summer distribution of Pacific walrus.



Daily locations of over 90 walrus tagged in the Bering (circles) and Chukchi (triangles) Seas, from 2004-2007. Note that the absence of walrus locations in some areas can be due to an uneven distribution of tagging effort, and therefore, the distribution of locations depicted here should not be construed as preferred habitat.

Climate change is altering the extent, thickness, and persistence of sea ice over the walrus's range. These changes are likely affecting the distribution, foraging behaviors, and vital rates of walrus. USGS is striving to improve understanding of ice dynamics in the Chukchi and Bering Seas and its impact on walrus.



Approximate winter distribution of Pacific walrus (After Fay 1982, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 1987, Mimirn et al. 1990, and Smirnov et al. 2002).