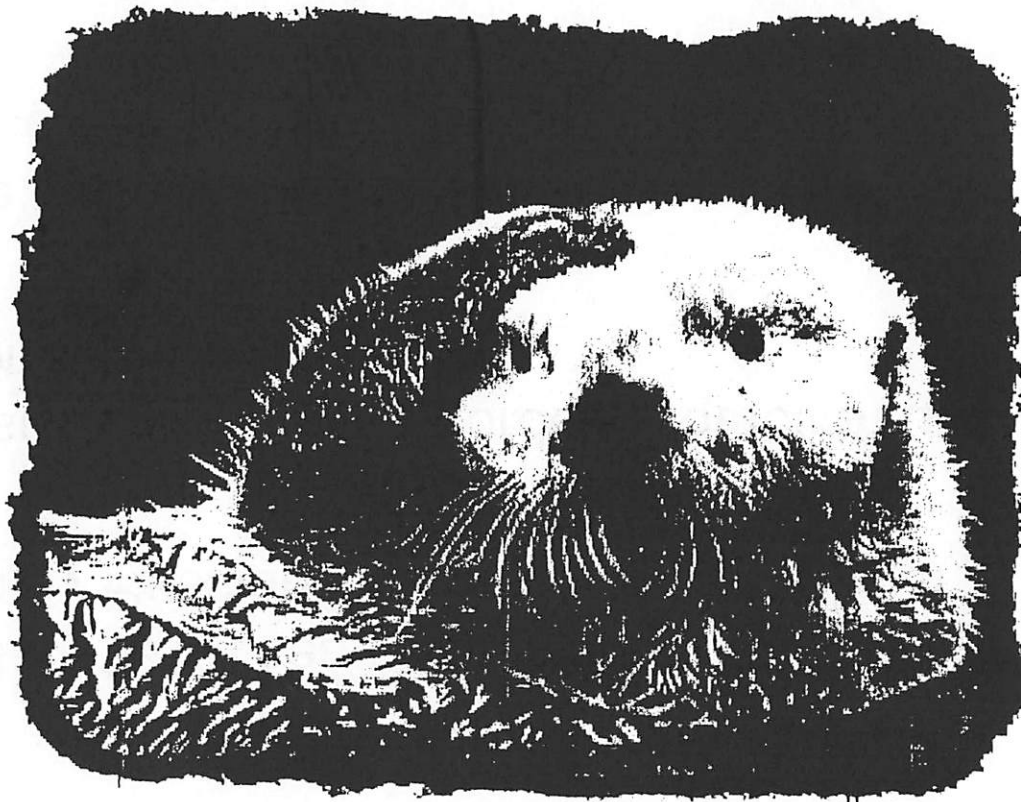


Sea Otter Decline in the Aleutian Islands



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Region 7 - Alaska



Background I

- ❖ From 1741 - 1911, sea otters were hunted to the brink of extinction by Russian and American fur hunters.
- ❖ In 1911, sea otters were afforded protection under an International Fur Seal Treaty.
- ❖ Executive Order 1733, signed by President Taft in 1913, established the Aleutian Islands Reservation.
- ❖ At that time, only a few remnant populations remained. Two of these populations were located in the Aleutian Islands (Rat Islands and Central Aleutians).

Background II

- ❖ First systematic surveys of sea otters in the Aleutian Islands were conducted in the early 1960s by Karl Kenyon.
- ❖ By 1965, sea otters had recolonized the Rat Islands and most of the Central Aleutians.
- ❖ Sea otters had yet to return to the Near Islands, Islands of Four Mountains, and Fox Islands.

Background III

- ❖ In 1992, the USFWS conducted an aerial survey of sea otters from Unimak Pass to Attu Island.
- ❖ Results showed that otters had recolonized the Near Islands, Islands of Four Mountains, and Fox Islands.
- ❖ Otters had unexpectedly declined (since 1965) by more than 50% in the Rat Islands and Central Aleutians.
- ❖ The Aleutians had long been considered a stronghold for sea otters. In the mid-1980s it had been estimated that half the world population occurred there.

Background IV

- ❖ Skiff surveys in the mid-1990s by Estes *et al.* revealed drastic declines of sea otters at several locations.
- ❖ The cause of the decline appeared to be due to increased adult mortality. Starvation, disease, and contaminants did not appear to be factors.
- ❖ Subsistence hunting by Alaska Natives occurs at a very low level, and is not considered to be a contributing factor.
- ❖ Several lines of evidence suggest that killer whale predation may be the cause of the decline.

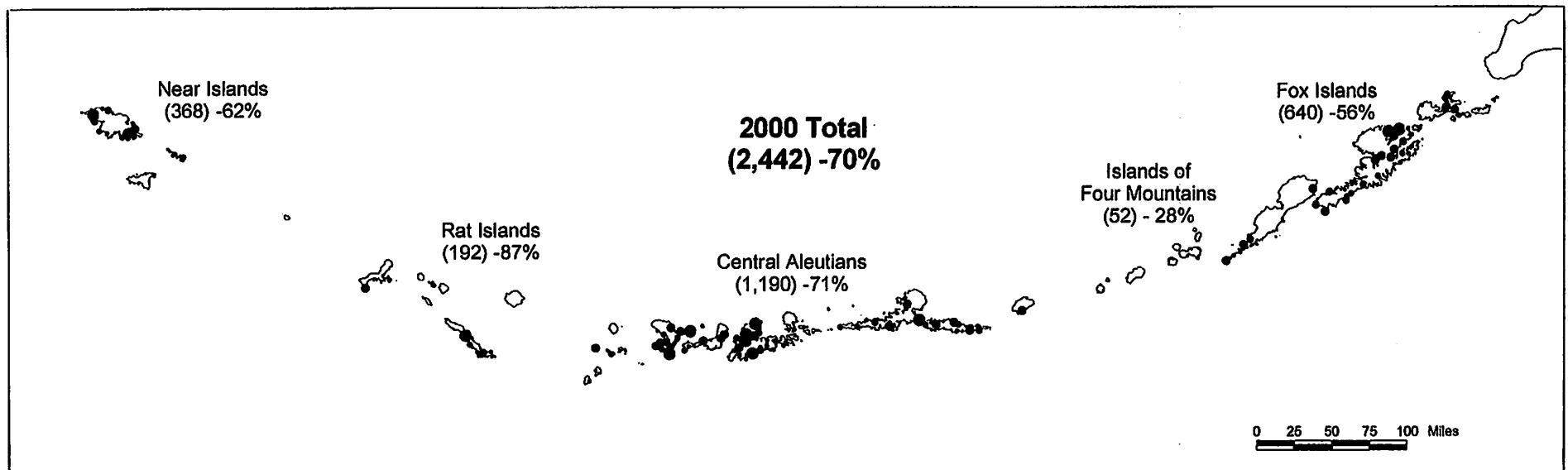
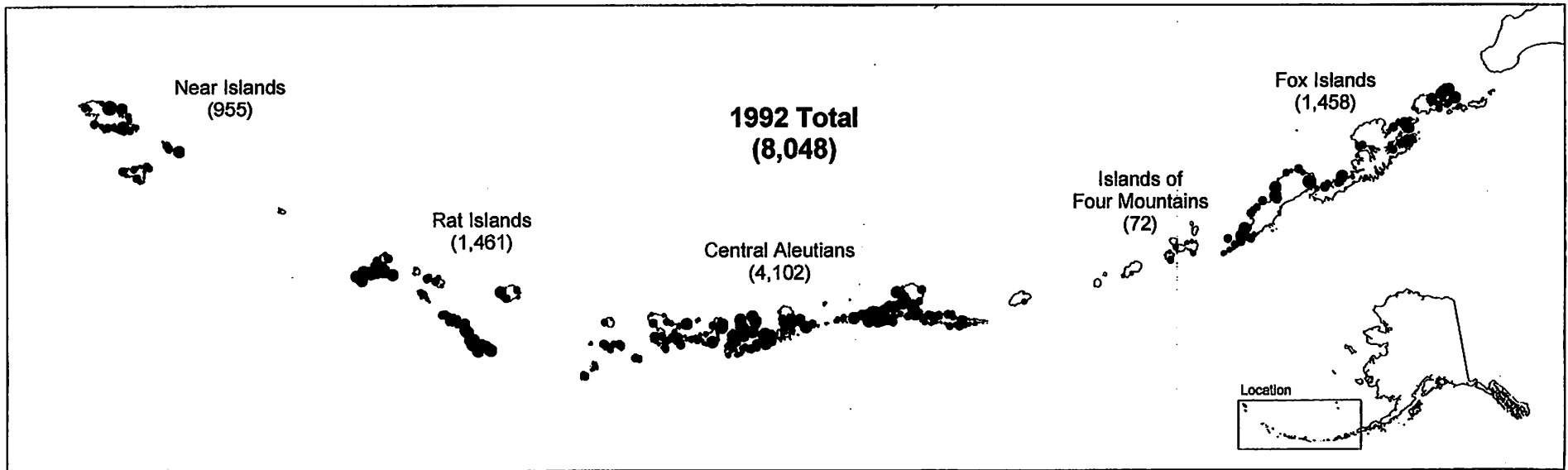
Background V

- ❖ In April, 2000, the USFWS, Marine Mammals Management Office repeated the 1992 aerial survey to determine the overall magnitude and geographic extent of the decline.
- ❖ Surveys were conducted at 100m altitude and an airspeed of 100 kts. All otters sighted within 1/4 mile of shore were recorded using an onboard computer with GPS capability.
- ❖ In addition to sea otters, observations of Steller sea lions and harbor seals were recorded and provided to the National Marine Fisheries Service.



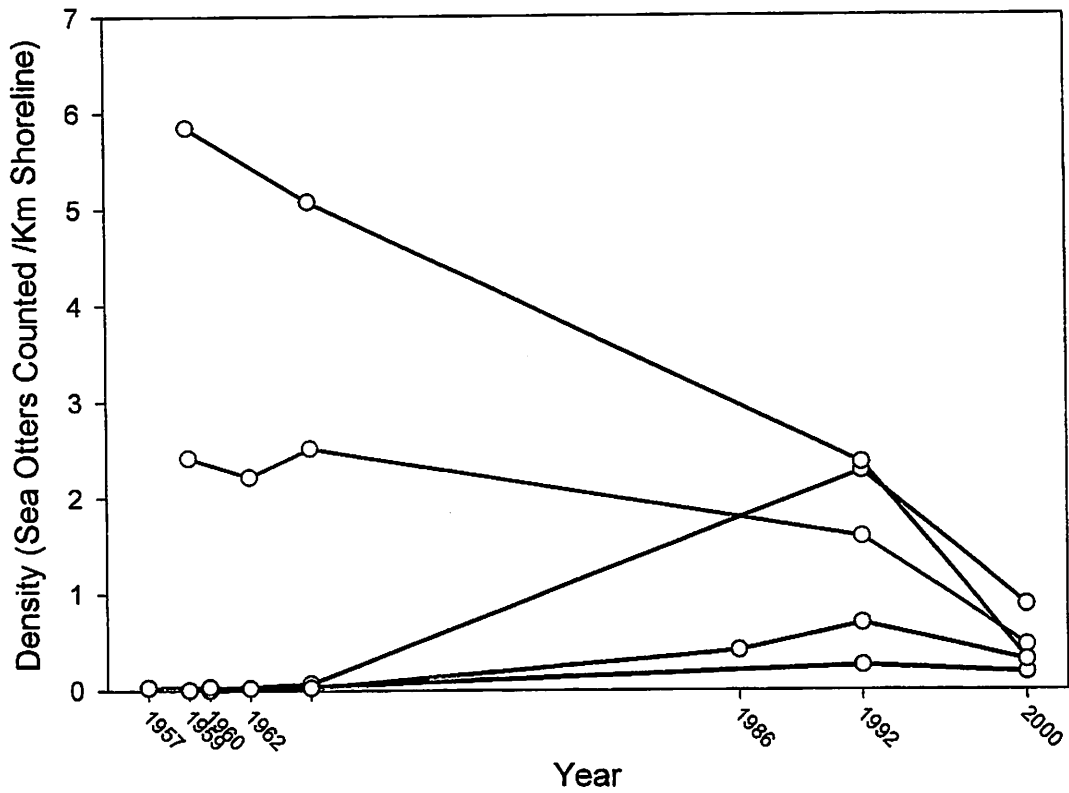
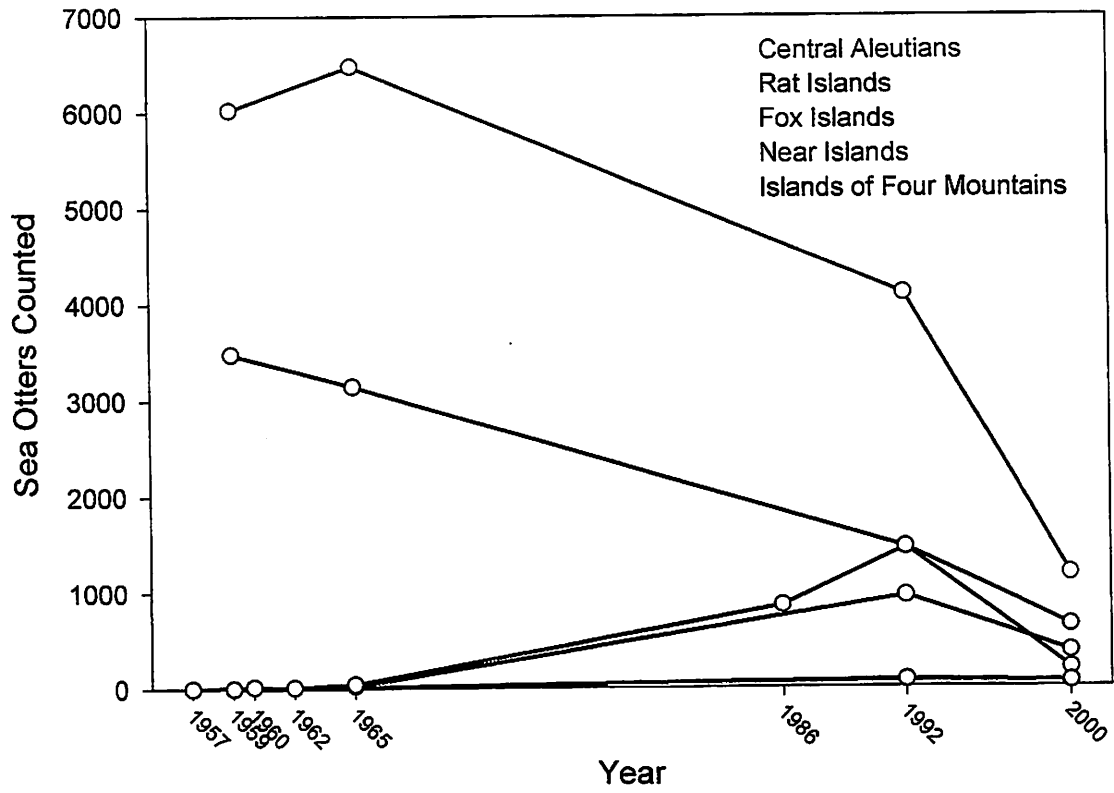
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service - Region 7

Aleutian Islands Sea Otter Aerial Survey Results



Numbers in parentheses () indicate sea otter counts uncorrected for sightability. Percentages indicate declines relative to 1992 survey.

Historical trend in sea otter abundance in the Aleutian Islands. Data are sea otter counts from aerial surveys, uncorrected for sightability.



Conservation Measures

- ❖ On August 22, 2000, USFWS designated sea otters in the Aleutian Islands (Unimak Pass to Attu) a Candidate Species under the Endangered Species Act.
- ❖ On August 30-31, 2000, USFWS staff presented information at a board meeting of the Alaska Sea Otter and Steller Sea Lion Commission.
- ❖ A U.S. - Russia sea otter workshop is scheduled for November 14-16, 2000, in Monterey, California. A full day of the workshop will be dedicated to reviewing recent survey results and discussing research and management strategies for the future.

On the Horizon

- ❖ Aerial surveys on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula indicate a 47-64% decline in sea otter abundance since 1986.
- ❖ USFWS will survey the southern side of the Alaska Peninsula in May, 2001, for comparison with data from 1986.
- ❖ USFWS will survey the Kodiak archipelago in June, 2001, for comparison with data from 1994.
- ❖ MMM, AMNWR, and TASSC hope to expand skiff surveys to include additional islands in the eastern Aleutians.