

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report (B-5)

Endangered Species Act

Sea otter – The Service proposed to list the Southwest Alaska distinct population segment of sea otters as threatened under the ESA on February 11, 2004. The final rule is still under review in Washington, D.C. I do not have a date when the final rule will be published. Under B-5 in the Council notebooks is a fact sheet which shows the continued declines of sea otters in western Alaska in 2003 and 2004.

Polar bear – The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the Secretary of the Interior and the Fish and Wildlife Service to list the polar bear under the ESA on February 16, 2005. The petitioner argues that the polar bear faces the likelihood of severe endangerment and possible extinction by the end of the century as a result of a warming climate and the loss of sea ice on which the bear and its primary food source, the ringed seal, depend. The petition is currently under review by the Service.

Yellow-billed loon – The petition to list the yellow-billed loon under the ESA, dated April 5, 2004, is still under review in our Washington Office. The yellow-billed loon is one of the rarest birds in North America with a worldwide population of about 21,000 individuals. The Alaska population is estimated at 6,000 birds. This species is intrinsically vulnerable with low population size and low fecundity. Small changes to adult survival are likely to have population level effects. Yellow-billed loons do winter in coastal Alaska waters; however a small sample of loons tagged with satellite transmitters on the North Slope all wintered in Asian waters as far south as the Korean Peninsula. Loons are vulnerable to a number of known threats including oil spills, but there are no known incidents of mortality in Alaskan commercial groundfish fisheries. The Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the Bureau of Land Management and other partners on a conservation agreement for this species on its North Slope and western Alaska breeding grounds.

Other Issues

Pacific walrus survey – The Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and several other partners are collaborating on a range-wide survey of Pacific walrus, the first of its kind since 1990. A survey to test methodologies is currently underway in the Bering Sea with a full range-wide survey scheduled for 2006 depending on funding. The methodology involves developing density estimates using a high altitude thermal scanner and counts of walruses in groups. Density estimates are then adjusted for the proportion of walruses underwater using a sample of walrus that are tagged with radio transmitters. A fact sheet on the walrus tagging project is included under B-5.

North Pacific Research Board funding – We were pleased with the results from the recent NPRB funding decision. Four projects on seabirds were funded, the following three with FWS involvement:

Short-tailed albatross habitat and fisheries interactions - continuation of the study looking at the distribution of short-tailed albatross in the North Pacific and factors influencing that distribution by Greg Balogh (FWS) and Rob Suryan (Oregon State University)

Seabirds as indicators of marine ecosystems by John Piatt (USGS), Vernon Byrd (FWS), David Irons (FWS) and Alan Springer (UAF)

Expanding the seabird tissue archival monitoring program by Dave Roseneau (FWS), Paul Becker (NIST), and Geoff York (USGS)

Availability of Report - the Pollock Conservation Co-operative (PCC) has authorized release of a report, entitled "Pilot Tests of Techniques to Mitigate Seabird Interactions with Catcher Processor Vessels in the Bering Sea Pollock Trawl Fishery, Final Report, November 19, 2004", by Ed Melvin, Kim Dietrich and Tim Thomas. The Fish and Wildlife Service is appreciative of the trawl industry for tackling this problem head on.



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Alaska Sea Otters

New surveys show the decline continues in southwest Alaska

Southwest Alaska population proposed for listing as threatened under the ESA
On February 11, 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposed listing sea otters in southwest Alaska as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This determination was based on range-wide aerial surveys of sea otters that showed dramatic population declines throughout much of southwest Alaska. Overall, the population declined by an estimated 56-68% since the mid-1980s. Although the current population likely numbers around 40,000 individuals, the declining population trend is cause for concern.

New survey data

At the time the listing proposal was published (69 FR 6600), there was no evidence that the decline had abated. In 2003 and 2004, the Service, along with

the U.S. Geological Survey, conducted additional skiff and aerial surveys of sea otters at selected locations in southwest Alaska. This new survey data indicates that the population decline has continued throughout most of the region.

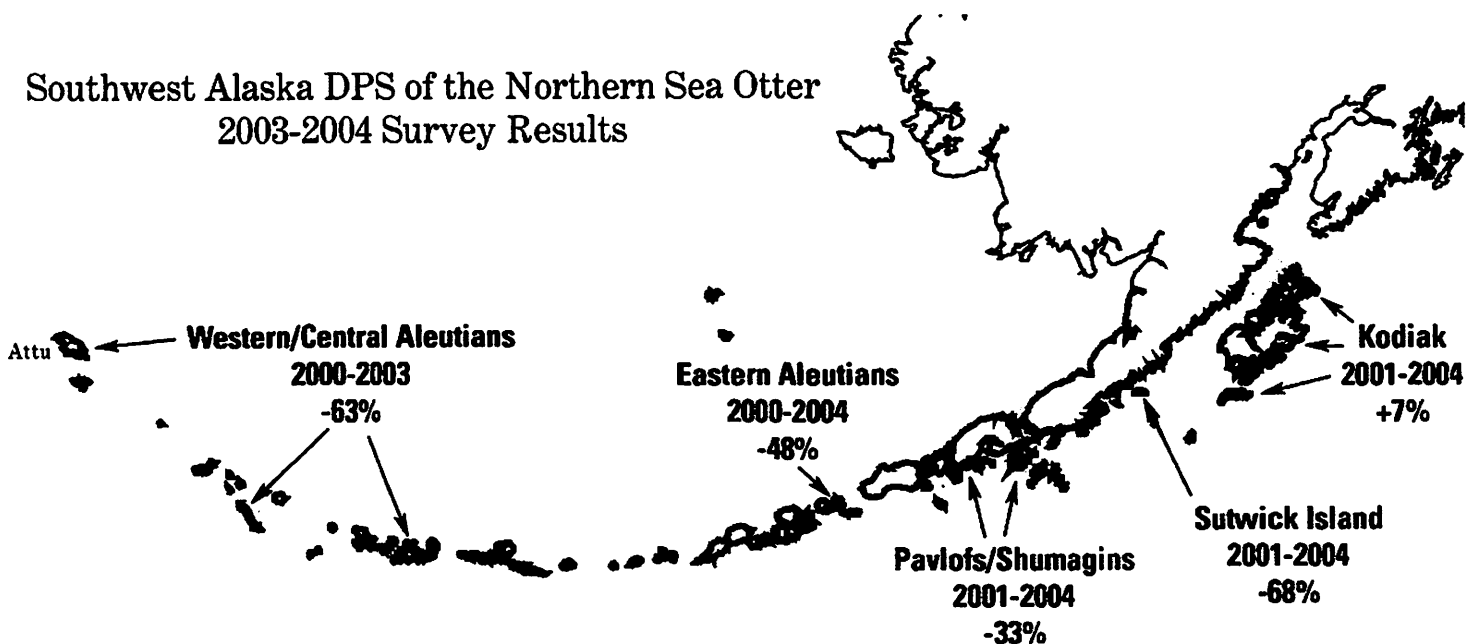
The greatest declines were seen in the western and central Aleutian islands. At one island (Attu) where 1,600 otters were counted in 1986, only 132 remained in 2003. The numbers of sea otters counted also declined in the eastern Aleutians islands, the Pavlof and Shumagin islands, and Sutwick Island in the Gulf of Alaska.

One area that did not show signs of further declines was the Kodiak archipelago. In 2004, we estimate the population size at 6,284 otters, which



is slightly higher, but not significantly different from our previous estimate of 5,893 in 2001. The reason for the difference between sea otter population trends in Kodiak and other areas of southwest Alaska is unknown. The Service and the U.S. Geological Survey are currently planning for additional sea otter studies in the Kodiak area.

Southwest Alaska DPS of the Northern Sea Otter 2003-2004 Survey Results



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<http://www.fws.gov>

Photo by Dr. Randall Davis,
Texas A&M University

November 2004

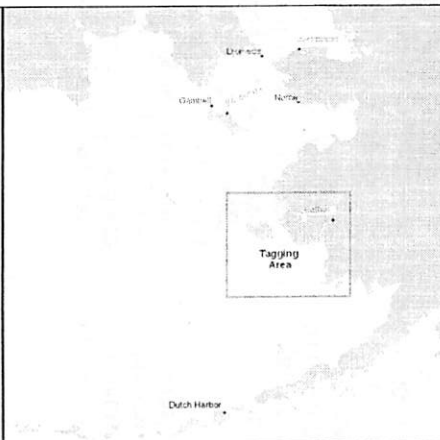
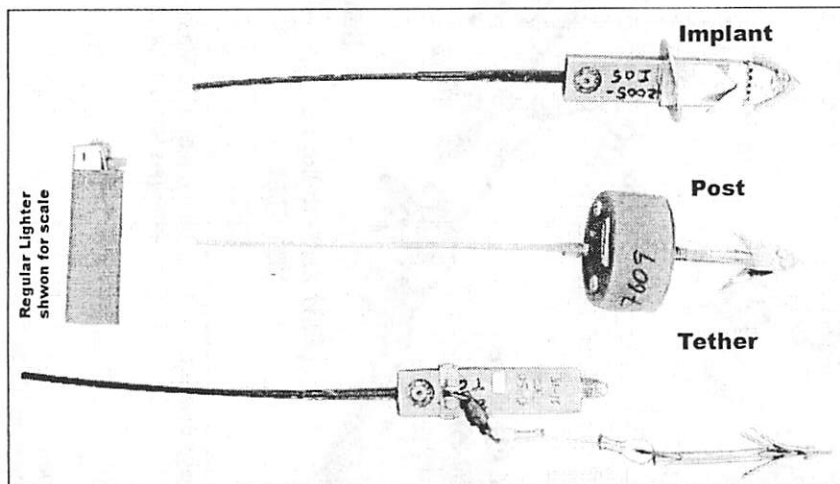
For more information please contact:
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Visit the Marine Mammals home page:
<http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm>

2005 Spring Walrus Tagging

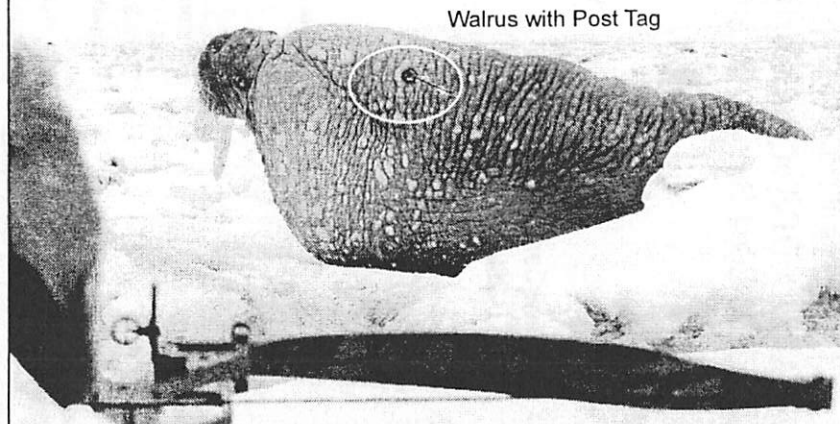
Trials for a Future Population Survey



Key

- Tagging Locations
- Satellite Tracking of Tagged Walrus

This study compares the performance of 3 tag designs. All tags are secured to the animal with anchors in the blubber layer of the walrus. Most of the implant tag is entirely secured within the blubber and skin layers of the walrus. The post tag has a small stainless steel shaft to which the transmitter is rigidly attached to the outside. The tether tag has a small stainless steel shaft with a flexible connection on the outside to which the transmitter is attached.

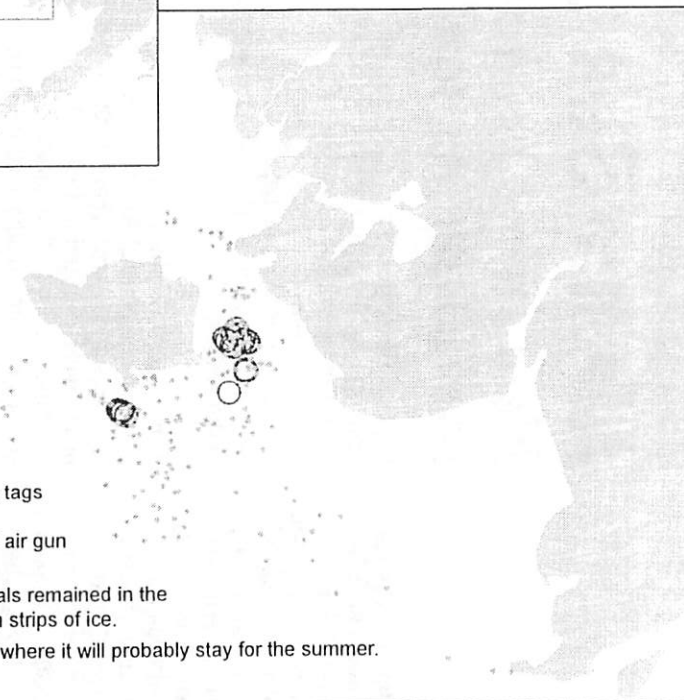


Walrus with Post Tag

Study area where satellite radio tags were attached to 26 walruses. Scientists used a crossbow and air gun to attach the tags to the walrus.

After about 12 days, most animals remained in the vicinity of Nunivak Island on thin strips of ice.

One male moved to Bristol Bay where it will probably stay for the summer.



If you see a tagged walrus please contact:

Chad Jay -- chad_jay@usgs.gov, (907) 786-7414

Tony Fischbach -- afischbach@usgs.gov, (907) 786-7145

or

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Marine Mammals Management
(907) 786-3800

The USGS Alaska Science Center conducted this study with the following partners:
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Greenland Institute of Natural Resources
Chukotka Branch of the Pacific Fisheries Research Center
Eskimo Walrus Commission
Alaska Department of Fish and Game