

Southeast Sea Otter Stakeholder Working Group Quarterly Meeting

September 24, 2021 9:00 am – 12:00 pm AK

Virtual Meeting

Summary/Notes

Participants: Kathy Hansen, Maya Becker (Murkowski), Brad Benter, Carly Besh (Murkowski), Carter Johnson, Joseph Eisaguirre, John Moller, Ginny Eckert, Sarah Hanchett, Katharine Nalven, Lynn Lee, Sabrina Farmer, Amy Kirkham, Jenell Larsen Tempel, Lee Kadinger, Patrick Lemons, Bo L Meredith, Mike Miller, Perry Williams, Caroline Cummings, Ben Weitzman, Phil Doherty, Paul Schuette, Mike Jackson, Jamie O'Conner (Murkowski)

Introduction of participants on the meeting platform. Congressional Delegation will be moved towards the end of the meeting when Jamie O'Conner is available to join the meeting.

Topic – Harvest Management

Historical sea otter management – Mike Miller

- Sitka sound was one of the first places sea otter populations took off with rapid population growth and expansion following reintroduction efforts. Starting in the late 1980s, the Tribe began to view this increase in sea otters in the area as an economic opportunity. In 1988 the first commission was formed to work on sea otter issues. In the 1990s, research was conducted to develop harvest management plans and in 1993 the first formal plan was created. However, this plan was limited by FWS interpretation of what was determined to be “significantly altered” in regards to the MMPA definition for handicrafts, resulting in a court case that challenged the use of a zipper in a sea otter parka as “nontraditional” and thus a violation of the MMPA. The hunter won this case, which changed harvest moving forward. At that time the bulk of harvest came out of Sitka due to the sea otter population boom. Observations of otter expansion coincided with observations of a reduction in shellfish harvest. Local people asked Tribe to increase sea otter harvest as way to protect important subsistence resources. Co-management initiatives were discussed but nothing was actually occurring on the grounds.
- Sea otter populations continued to expand. In 2002 the Tribe deemed it a topic of priority. Moving forward, the Tribe worked practical initiatives such as funding for a tannery operation which was operational in 2005, promoted skin-sewing programs, held management workshops and drafted management plans instead of only documenting damages. However, the path ended up being to work on economic development and not following the management plans.
- Fluctuations in harvest occurred over the years due to lack of clarity on rules and regulations, particularly over language in the MMPA and qualifiers for sea otter parts being “significantly altered.” This caused contention and poor relations with FWS, further fueled by a large FWS law enforcement operation in 2008 in which several people were charged.
- There is still a need to clarify the language in the MMPA about handicrafts and to rebuild comfort with local hunters. The Tribe obtained 3 years funding for sustainable arts from State of Alaska in areas where sea otters hyperabundant. Congressmen Young looking at language in MMPA to be able to export furs out of the state. This was not approved, but the Tribe took opportunity to promote management effort through existing provisions and promotion of sustainable art. In 2011-2012, there was push back from FWS. National director FWS visited Sitka. Developed new language agreed upon by FWS AK and AK Natives. Since 2016, the relationship with FWS has improved. Sitka harvest has increased again.

- Historically, harvest has not been driven by biological research but was instead a reactionary way to deal with sea otter issues observed by the local community. Within Sitka, sea otter harvest and a more stable (not fast expansion) population of sea otters, there has been a resurgence in invertebrate subsistence shellfish (abalone, gumboots, etc.), especially where there are not otters present but not sure at what level. Abalones have been seen in areas where they traditionally never were located.
- Moving forward, expansion of the sustainable arts program, promote harvest and the statewide initiative to work on a regional basis/approach is under discussion are all possible within current regulatory framework. Artists are not as afraid to make and sell handicrafts.

Comments/Response from group- increase in some invertebrates might be from seastar wasting disease, and the reduction in the predator Pycnopodia (sunflower star) allowing those inverts to come back. Virus might be expanding to other echinoderms such as sea cucumbers and urchins. No recovery of sun stars has been observed in SE since their decline. In Sitka sound, otters are not abundant anymore; harvest keeping population there in check. Invertebrate populations are not solely driven by otters, there are other ocean conditions happening. Promote harvest. Research important but don't wait on research. Mike pointed out that in Sitka the strong, directed harvest happened after the sea otter population spike in Sitka. So their example is a little different than an area where the expansion might just be developing and this situation may be more challenging.

Present Initiatives

Sealaska Heritage Center -Lee Kadinger

- Since 2013, offer State- sponsored by classes. Trained near 500 individuals in skin sewing in over 15 communities in SE AK. Looking to expand into northern communities with the goal to create a sustainable cottage industry and revitalize a lost art form which had occurred with the historical loss of sea otters. With these classes, there has been an increased use of sea otters in regalia and celebrations. Hunters provide about 200 pelts a year to classes, work with ADFG to focus harvest where shellfish fisheries under threat of closure due to sea otter predation pressure. In 2019, saw a significant increase in artists working with sea otter products. One hurdle for individuals and artists was obtaining access to markets. Many were selling products through social media, but this was banned by Facebook and Etsy unless individuals paid to advertise. There is currently no organized marketing for marine mammal products, which is necessary to expand. Worked with tanneries to allow better access, also ways to offer shearing and dying so artists have other avenues to diversify what they are selling. Sea otter marketing brochure with FWS, hopefully out in next year. SHI has retail store, but issues/confusion from customers about legality of purchasing ivory and sea otter products. Need brochure to communicate that they are allowable/legal products to sell to visitors, and to remove trepidation from the buyer.
- The State of Alaska sustainable arts grant was originally for a three year program but only the first two years occurred and the third year that was to focus on marketing is still needed.

Hunter's perspective

- John: kids are hunters, daughter is an artist. In recent experience there has been a lack of quality in tanning of hides. Set-back when it is an expensive service and the hide not as workable or too oily.

- Mike: Inconsistency of harvest makes it hard for tanneries to maintain their consistency in quality, and building of capacity within a tannery. Hard to keep good workers if harvest goes down. Also it is expensive. Likely needs subsidy to maintain a commercial operation.
- Lee offered to chat further with hunters for options for a good product.

USFWS Marking Tagging Reporting Program – Sarah Hanchett

- Overview of harvest trends. MTRP- monitor subsistence and handicraft use of animals. Stay locally engaged with communities. Importance of maintaining a two-way dialogue. Data shows - peaks and lulls of harvest throughout the years, likely attributed to enforcement efforts and issues surrounding differences in interpretations of the legality of “significantly altered” language. Shows that it is vital that the public has clear understanding of policy and management interpretation actions. Overall, there has been an increase in harvest and otters harvested in novel locations. Variability in group size over time. Sitka- no trend in harvesting from large groups vs from small groups. Numbers by area not always exact data because hunters travel to and from locations. MTRP does have more fine scale location data, but as Brad mentioned, some hunters don’t want their locations being broadcast. See attached presentation PDF.
- Presentation showed the first peak of harvest occurred in 1992-93 followed by a sharp decline with the 1992 Didrickson vs FSO court case (zipper/significantly altered). Harvest was stable (low) in the middle 1990 to 2010 with change in tannery operations and definitions being worked on. Harvest slowly increased through 2009-2012 with peak harvests 2013-15 with the conclusion of the 2012 “Significantly altered handicraft” definition workshop and the 2012 Sealaska sustainable arts program.

Future projections

Individual interest and goals for Southeast (SE) sea otters

- Tribal/Subsistence - Look at sea otter as a sustainable resource and economic development for Tribal people and help protect existing subsistence resources in SE AK
- Commercial Fisheries – Trying to look for a balance for the sea otter and shellfish resources that are important
- Federal – Manage and maintain optimal sustainable populations (OSP) of sea otters under the jurisdiction of the MMPA
- Environmental/NGO: Katy Nalven from Defenders. Want a robust, resilient population of sea otters to fulfill their ecological role as a keystone species. Advocate for long-term trends management, research and monitoring, population health, stakeholder engagement, ethical tourism, non-lethal coexistence, respectful recognition of Tribal harvest and indigenous rights

Goals of the Group and next steps

Phil- laws in place but it is an uphill battle, need to come up with sea otter management plan that would open up options for hunters. SE survey didn’t get done and nothing has changed in last year. Dive fisheries have been negatively impacted- geoduck areas closed, because population has dropped, right in the middle of sea otter country. Sea cucumbers have also declined and lost almost all of sea urchins. Happens every year: fewer and fewer areas to fish in and less and less pounds to harvest. Currently not many tools for hunters. Anything that will help harvest and control sea otters is needed.

Ginny- disappointed there wasn't a survey. Would like an update from FWS. Is it possible that the survey could reveal that there is decreasing harvest because there is a decreasing otter population?

Patrick- FWS struggled with contracts, carding for aircrafts, and government bureaucracy. By the time things were in place, it was late in the season. But survey is the priority for next year. Currently working on photo processing techniques, developing workflow ahead of time. The survey is scheduled for May-June 2022. Population estimates were published using new modeling approaches by Joe Eisaguirre <https://movementecologyjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40462-021-00270-w> Paul mentioned FWS also has a graduate student posting that will build on the population model that Joe published earlier this year, but will hopefully incorporate harvest, as well as invertebrate data. Setbacks with aerial survey were due administrative aspects, Covid, and want to do survey right so it was postponed. Please share opportunity with prospective students. <https://wfscjobs.tamu.edu/jobs/ms-assistantship-sea-otter-habitat-use-reno-tahoe/>. Still planning to finalize survey results in the original time frame with March of 2023 being the goal.

Congressional Delegation – Jamie O'Connor (Murkowski office) (interrupted discussion when she joined the meeting platform)

Jamie started by telling a little bit about herself, grew up in BB and served on the NPFMC Advisory Panel prior to starting work. in Senator's office in March. Traveled around SE w/Senator an otters came up in 2/3rds of the meetings attended

Question from Phil to Jamie O'Connor (Murkowski)- any discussions in AK delegation that will change MMPA that will slow down sea otter growth in AK? Jamie said they are hesitant to crack open the MMPA. Administration has goals for MMPA, and she is not confident to share anything definitive, but happy to bring back concerns to DC. Looking forward to FWS survey results. Haven't heard much in talks about ESA in the senate. Mike Miller: Arctic communities don't like us tinkering with the MMPA. However, in the most recent meeting starting to build consensus in communities throughout the State of AK to create regional plans using existing language in the MMPA, and how things can progress. Would like to follow up on what that looks like. Lack of current survey data shouldn't preclude initiatives and increased utilization from moving forward.

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BACK TO DISCUSSION

How can we best move forward sustainable arts opportunities and programs?

Expand outreach and increase classes available beyond SHC region. More instructors reduces the cost. Hides and tanning is largest cost driver of project. Expansion of classes into northern communities is of interest. Collaboration between SE and northern communities would allow for exchange of sea otter for other marine mammal fur increasing the usage. Need for development of marketing campaign, similar to success of ivory campaign that alleviates misunderstanding of legality surrounding fur products. Federal support via signage and brochures is helpful to reduce negative associations with use of marine mammal products. Work within the confines of the current law, barring any major legislative changes. Need to remember that generally the hunters and handicrafters are different groups of individuals.

John: There are constraints with the existing law. This is a conversation some don't want to have. In parts of our State we are running out of qualified hunters, which is a growing problem. Tribal organizations themselves should be the ones to determine who are qualified hunters of marine mammals. This conversation was started with the congressional delegation.

Lee: Blood quantum membership by region- SE is decreasing in BQ relative to northern areas. Have study he can share. Shearing: set up with tannery to become fully registered. Surplus excess pieces of fur that don't get used- Remington, Stetson hats, discussion but nothing came of it. How can we use everything? Not wasting is a Native value. Becomes a matter of scale that makes it worthwhile for those companies; can't send fur to these companies to be felted due to regulations, so would have to learn technique ourselves.

Mike Jackson: There are roadblocks in rural areas, but the Tribe trying to figure out how to make harvest sustainable. In general, it is expensive to get out and hunt; gas prices are high (\$7.00 gal). Sea otter population has been growing and there are observations of more males in the area. Trying to keep otters out of Hamilton Bay specifically because that is where there are shellfish resources. Crab wiped out everywhere else by otters. Otters do respond to hunting pressure. Another big issue now is ammo, which is short on supply everywhere. Would really like a shearing and pluck machine to increase marketability. Is there a market for "odds and ends" of leftover fur pieces, maybe something can work out with tanneries? Incorporate into other clothing/fashion items?

Next Steps and goals for next meeting

- Increase efforts in stakeholder engagement.
- POW sea otter commission- hear from members about interests and concerns. Dennis Nickerson- local survey efforts. Are there any other local groups doing that? Open to discussion, could provide feedback to FWS to inform or cross check what is found in population model.
- Scott Jackson- younger hunter who developed his own tannery, works with lots of young, local hunters, can provide insight into populations around Kake area.
- Sonia Ibarra invite- hired locals for her PhD work, used indigenous knowledge and made a big impact on communities. Many from communities went on to get higher education in biology and ecological sciences.