

SOUTHEAST SEA OTTER STAKEHOLDER WORKGROUP QUARTERLY MEETING

September 8, 2022 9:00 am – 12:00 pm AK

Virtual Meeting

SUMMARY/NOTES

Participants: Jen Cate, Kathy Hansen, Co-chairs; Jeff Meucci, Carter Johnson, Colin Power, Bo Meredith, Joe Eisaguirre, Lynn Lee, Andrew Johnson, Evan Wetherington, Mandy Migura, Taylor White, Tim Tinker, Mike Jackson, Ben Weitzman, Mike Miller.

No one had any objections to the meeting being recorded.

Kathy agreed to check with SARDFA about their continued participation with Phil's retirement.

Introductions of participants on the meeting platform. During introductions Mike Jackson from Kake mentioned he knew the oral history of sea otters before the Russians were here.

Following introductions Andrew Johnson (new member representative for Defenders of Wildlife replacing Katy Bear) gave a power-point presentation (on file) about himself and the group he represents. Andy lives in California and has been working with sea otters for over 40 years, managing the Monterey Bay Aquarium sea otter research and conservation program. Will advocate for the sea otters as part of the nearshore ecosystem and that the sea otters are not a problem to "fix". Mike Miller commented following the presentation that handicrafts and economic opportunities are part of the MMPA but agrees that handicraft and economic opportunities are not to be used for predator control.

KEY ACTION ITEMS FROM MEETING:

- Combine goals 1 and 3 and hold an in person meeting in Juneau/virtual for this new combined committee to work further on the goals with the intent of producing a product/story board that could be available on multiple sites.
- Continuation of trying to add group representation – tourism & artists

Presentations:

Taylor White is working on an NPRB project "Diverse knowledge systems for the examination of localized dynamics of sea otter and abalone populations in Sitka Sound, Alaska" (Power point presentation on file). The project beginnings and motivations were the limited current and historical local information on abalone and sea otters. The core question is "What are the local abalone population and ecosystem trends following local sea otter re-establishment, harvest, and or/occupation length?" The project aims to 1.) pair local and indigenous knowledge with quantitative information on abalone and sea otter populations and harvest to understand key trends of current, historical and future populations; 2.) Support tribal and stakeholder sovereignty in the management and future research of these important species. Taylor mentioned that there are distinct populations between Sitka, Prince of Wales and Ketchikan.

After the presentation questions were asked including if the bar graph that shows harvest increase – was it a driver in the abalone rebound? Lynn asked about ocean temperatures and the sea star wasting disease. She saw an increase in recruitment during the heat wave. Asked about the size structure as well as the density. Taylor answered that it is med size and juveniles but not a large increase in the legal-size abalone. Tim chatted that it sounds like you have much of the data to develop a size structured ODE type model for abalone that could include sea otter predation and harvest as well as natural mortality. Mike pointed out that Sitka Sound was protected from abalone harvest sooner than other parts of SE and that there is a present day local active harvest on abalone which would be harvesting legal size as well as some illegal harvest in amount and size.

Mike Miller gave an update on statewide group's work on the MMPA with the agency and delegation as well as further defining harvest initiatives within existing structures using area delegation of authority. Working in concert with agency on messaging have been also working to stabilize funding for MMPA and the agency for MMPA species. It appears that the group is making progress and getting past some of the hurdles.

Sea Otter Population Survey Update: Final report is still expected in March of 2023. The survey group was able to do the survey transect with reasonably good weather May 26th – June 17th with 124 hours of flight time and approximately 7,586 km of transects flown, completing the intended survey design. Still working on Waldo imagery to continue machine learning and validation of machine results and in preparation for data analysis and population modeling. See previous paper (on file) SE Alaska: Diffusion Model: Estimated Sea Otter Range Expansion/Recolonization (2021).

National Park Service bought the same type of camera system for Glacier Bay surveys which they do on an annual/bi-annual basis. By using the same protocol, it is easy to integrate their results with the SE survey.

The imagery also provided documentation of sightings of Cetaceans, seals, sea lions, bears and seabirds/ducks.

Other Updates:

Lynn mentioned that ~~the~~ Haida Gwaii project, Xaayda Gwaay.yaay Kuugaay Gwii Sdiihl't'ixa - Haida Gwaii Kuu Sea Otter Project, is in the initial stage of ~~will be~~ finishing, ~~expected up~~ in March of 2023. Community interests and social ecological considerations are part of the modeling. Jen asked how Lynn got all the interested parties together. Lynn said the main group is about 40-45 people and their willingness to be open to other perspectives on a polarizing issue ~~where no one gets completely what they want as well with as~~ no pre-determined answers going into the project allowed the group to explore different approaches, learning as they went. Importantly, the project team is not making or recommending management decisions; instead, the final project discussions and outcomes are

~~is meant to inform management decisions, but not make or recommend management decisions by the Haida Nation and Canadian federal government.~~

Green Crab (invasive species) were brought up with quite a lively discussion and interest in continuing to monitor this situation. Sea otters will eat green crab but is not a preferred prey choice. Tim expects a manuscript to be published in the next month or so on the Elk Horn Slough/green crab where trapping was also used to capture green crab. Carter (PhD student) is trapping Dungeness crab in Thomas Bay, Farragut, Duncan and ? with one of the questions being looked at, are crab going deeper in the presence of sea otters? An emerging issue is the lack of Dungeness crab. The SE commercial crab summer crab season was cut short. Tammy Davis is the ADF&G sportfish biologist that is the lead invasive species specialist. They are out on the grounds looking and testing for green crab in the Ketchikan area. The group asked for Bo to give an update on what ADF&G is seeing at the next quarterly meeting.

WORKPLAN Discussion:

At the last meeting a draft workplan was developed with 5 goals identified and sub-groups to work on the various goals.

Goal 1: Improve information sharing

Goal 2: Collaboration with other Southeast Groups

Goal 3: Management case studies – Sitka and Kake

Goal 4: Prioritize research projects within this working group so it is directly beneficial to this working group

Goal 5: Regular and routine SE population surveys

The group started with Goal 1: Improve information sharing. This group did some work and Mandy said that Alaska Wildlife Alliance might be willing to host a website but would cost around \$5-10K. There was a discussion about how the various interest groups don't like going to another groups website to get information, so if an NGO hosts the website, commercial groups won't likely access the information and if a commercial group hosted it wouldn't get NGO interests and the public likely accessing the information. Questions were asked about cost of a website, what data and who is in charge of what data, who is currently hosting the old southeast stakeholder workgroup website and final report. The pitfalls of a website fading into obscurity and how to prevent that. Ben said what he sees as the most helpful is more a storyboard product that provides a lot of information including the Sitka case study that could be hosted in multiple locations/websites and reach the broadest audience. This idea brought combining the sub-working groups for goal 1 and goal 3 together and start working on the story. Step 1 get the Sitka story down – week of November 11 was pinpointed for having an in-person meeting in Juneau with a virtual component. Mike said that AFN is having a work-session which is open on the 21st that might be of interest to this group. Another consideration will be funding both internally in FWS and externally. NOAA has some rebuilding initiative funding opportunities we might look at.

Closing Discussion/Next Meeting:

Ideas for the next quarterly meeting brought up during the meeting is Mike Jackson to give a talk/presentation about the oral history of sea otters before the Russians, Bo to give a follow up on ADF&G efforts to search for invasive green crab, Lynn [to update on Haida Gwaii's](#) project, and updates on progress of sub-groups on the goals.