

**Marine Mammal Commission 2017 Annual Meeting  
April 5-7, 2017, North Falmouth, Massachusetts**

**Arctic Update Session Summary**

The Arctic warrants special attention from the Marine Mammal Commission because its marine mammals, ecosystems, and dependent coastal communities are profoundly impacted by changes in weather patterns. In February 2016, the Marine Mammal Commission held [listening sessions](#) in Barrow (now Utqiagvik), Kotzebue, Nome, and Anchorage to hear from people living in each of these communities and surrounding villages about changes in the environment and marine mammals they are seeing and the availability of marine mammals for subsistence and cultural purposes. Since that time, the Commission has been actively engaged in a number of issues related to co-management of marine mammals, the assessment of Arctic marine mammals, and enhancing communication with Alaska Native communities.

Vicki Cornish updated the Commission on co-management activities and a potential review of co-management, as recommended by the Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals ([IPCoMM](#)). The Commission conducted a [review of co-management in 2008](#) but many of the same issues that we heard then still identified as barriers to full and effective co-management relationships between Alaska Native Organizations (ANOs) and federal agencies. These include inadequacies in funding, capacity, and engagement with federal agencies on science and management issues affecting Alaska Native communities. A review of co-management might address agreement on what co-management means, co-management agreements vs. cooperative agreements, expanding co-management agreements to other ANOs, funding, capacity, communication, participation by ANOs in all aspects of managing subsistence harvest, and incorporation of indigenous knowledge into federal decision-making.

At the Commission's 2016 Alaska listening sessions and annual meeting, Alaska Natives expressed concern about steps being taken by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to publish regulations to implement the polar bear harvest limits adopted under the bilateral U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Agreement ([Alaska Region - Marine Mammals Management](#)). In an effort to get polar bear co-management back on track, the Commission, along with FWS, the Alaska Nanuuq Commission (ANC), the North Slope Borough, and Kawerak, Inc., convened a polar bear summit in June 2016 ([Polar Bear - Marine Mammal Commission](#)), at which Native representatives from 13 villages that hunt polar bears discussed ways to improve communication regarding polar bear issues and decided to continue to be represented by the ANC. However, shortly thereafter, the FWS informed participants that it would no longer be able to fund the ANC. As a result, efforts have switched to the formation of a new Alaska Native organization (ANO) to represent polar bear hunters. IPCoMM held a meeting in January 2017 to begin forming the new ANO. The Commission provided input into the responsibilities and make-up of the new ANO and related actions to implement U.S. responsibilities under the bilateral agreement with Russia in a [9 January 2017 letter to the FWS](#).

Peter Thomas discussed the State of Arctic Marine Biodiversity Report (SAMBR) which has been prepared by the Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program of the [Conservation of Arctic Fauna and Flora](#) working group of the Arctic Council. It will be presented to the [Arctic](#)

[Council Ministers](#) in May 2017. SAMBR is a synthesis of knowledge and trends of Arctic biodiversity, including sea ice organisms, plankton, bottom-dwelling organisms, fishes, birds, and marine mammals. A Commission sponsored workshop in 2007 kicked off systematic efforts to compile status and trends information on high Arctic marine mammals. The SAMBR report builds on this and the 2013 [Arctic Biodiversity Assessment](#) and subsequent [scientific articles](#) on Arctic marine mammal population status and conservation.

Randy Reeves provided a summary of a recent workshop to develop a Global Review of Monodontids. The beluga and narwhal, which comprise the family Monodontidae, have not been subject to a global review of status since 1999 when the IWC Scientific Committee last conducted such a review. In March 2017, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) assembled monodontid experts from the five range states (USA, Canada, Greenland [Denmark], Norway, Russia) in Hillerød, Denmark. The stated goals of the meeting were to share current scientific knowledge on the status of each stock, identify the main gaps in knowledge, identify key threats to each stock, and outline possible areas of scientific cooperation. MMC Scientific Advisors Randall Reeves and Robert Suydam served on the planning committee and participated in the global review. A full report will be available in the coming months.

Luis Leandro gave an update on the development of the Commission's Alaska Communications Plan. One of the clear messages from the Commission's [2016 Alaska Listening Sessions](#) was the need for better two-way communication between the Alaska Native Community and federal agencies. Alaska Natives requested more transparency and information related to important subsistence marine mammal species. While the scope and magnitude of this problem is not something the Commission can address alone, we have taken several steps to improve this situation. We have developed and are implementing a Communications strategy to help us take a more coordinated and effective approach to our work in Alaska. In 2016 we co-sponsored and helped organize an Arctic-focused panel on [Capitol Hill Oceans Week](#), to help bring local voices and an Arctic perspective to the national level. We developed an [electronic newsletter](#) to share important marine mammal science and policy information to our Alaska stakeholders on a regular basis and, a [website page dedicated to Walrus](#) and we have been sharing Alaska-related news through twitter. We have also increased our physical presence in Alaska through participation in important meetings on Alaskan marine mammal issues, including IPCoMM board meetings.