



# Co-management of Marine Mammals in Alaska: A Case Study-Based Review



## Project Summary and Approach

The overall goal of this project was to strengthen co-management relationships in Alaska and improve the conservation and sustainability of marine mammals in a region where they are of critical ecological, social, and nutritional importance.

To achieve the project objectives (see box at right), we assembled a Steering Committee comprised of Alaska Natives and federal resource managers from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to guide the project and provide advice on engagement of co-management partners and community members.

In March 2018, we worked with the project Steering Committee to draft a working definition of co-management for the purpose of the review. The Steering Committee identified the following Alaska Native Organizations (ANOs) to serve as case studies for the project: the Eskimo



Steering Committee members and Principal Investigators (L to R): Jon Kurland, Vera Metcalf, Billy Adams, Lauren Divine, Jenna Malek, Vicki Cornish, Taqulik Hepa, and Patrick Lemons. Missing from the photo: Peggy Osterback and Pamela Lestenkoff.

Walrus Commission, the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, and the Aleut Marine Mammal Commission. Recognizing that not all current ANOs could be included in the review, the selected ANOs represented a diversity of Alaska marine mammal species, geographic regions, federal partners, and participating communities.

From May to August 2018, we met with NMFS, FWS, and ANO members, and visited Utqiagvik (Barrow), Gambell, Savoonga, Nome, St. Paul, Akutan, and Atka to conduct focus groups with marine mammal hunters and resource users, with a total of 73 people providing responses. The Steering Committee was instrumental in identifying persons in each community that were knowledgeable of co-management and subsistence activities and willing to share their perspectives.

In November 2018, we met with the Steering Committee to review the preliminary findings and recommendations from interviews and finalize the working definition of co-management. In Spring 2019, we returned to agency offices and communities we visited in 2018 to share the project findings and recommendations. The final draft of the report was reviewed by the Steering Committee in April 2019 and will be made publicly available in Summer 2019.

## Project Objectives

- Develop a “working” definition of co-management
- Identify important characteristics of, and major impediments to, effective co-management through:
  - a review of selected co-management and cooperative agreements, and
  - discussions with federal agency and Alaska Native co-management partners and community members
- Provide recommendations for improving co-management relationships that account for the constraints on available resources, including funding

## Steering Committee

**Billy Adams, Ice Seal Committee**

**Pamela Lestenkoff/Lauren Divine, Aleut Community of St. Paul Island**

**Taqulik Hepa, North Slope Borough**

**Jon Kurland, NMFS Alaska Region**

**Patrick Lemons, FWS Alaska Region**

**Vera Metcalf, Eskimo Walrus Commission**

**Peggy Osterback, Aleut Marine Mammal Commission**

## Working Definition of Co-Management

The working definition of co-management that the Steering Committee agreed upon is as follows:

*A partnership based on trust and respect, established between an Alaska Native Organization, as defined by the MMPA, and either NMFS or USFWS, with shared responsibilities for the conservation of marine mammals and their sustainable subsistence use by Alaska Natives.*

## Project Findings

Based on the information collected from agencies, case study ANOs and their affiliated communities, the review yielded findings in the following seven categories, with examples provided for each:

- **Key Elements of Co-Management**
  - Strong communication between partners
  - Integration of federal agency staff into communities and subsistence activities
  - Adequate resources including funding, logistical and staff support
  - Support from hunters and resource users
- **Partner Roles and Expectations**
  - Roles and expectations for each co-management partner are not clearly defined
  - Co-management partners do not always clearly understand each other's culture and organizational limits
- **Communication**
  - Information from co-management meetings is often not conveyed back to hunters, harvesters, and resource users
  - Communication is infrequent and lacks transparency
  - One size does not fit all for receiving and sending information to marine mammal hunting communities
- **Organizational Structure and Accountability**
  - Staffing, capacity, and availability of co-management partners hinders effective relationships
  - Strong fiscal accountability is needed from partners
- **Leadership Training and Transitioning**
  - Leadership of ANOs is growing older and there is inadequate involvement and mentoring of younger generations
  - There is no straightforward process for succession of new leaders into co-management organizations
- **Agency Practices and Decision-Making Processes**
  - Differences in how NMFS and FWS develop, interpret, communicate, and enforce regulations can cause confusion and frustration for ANOs, hunters, and resource users
  - Self-governance and enforcement authority for co-management at the ANO or community level would be more successful and positively received than enforcement by federal agents
  - Conclusions drawn from "western" science and marine mammal research activities are not sufficiently incorporating indigenous knowledge into management decisions



Focus group participants in Gambell.



Focus group participants in Savoonga.



Focus group participants in Nome.



Focus group participants in Atka.

- Internal decision-making processes, and how indigenous knowledge is incorporated into these processes, needs to be clearly understood by both co-management partners
- **Challenges of Subsistence Hunting and Harvesting and the Future of Co-Management**
  - Climate change is affecting subsistence hunting and harvesting through changes in species abundance, distribution, and health
  - Subsistence practices need to continue to be shared and practiced with younger generations to ensure the continuation of marine mammal use and co-management
  - Co-management is an important part of ensuring that marine mammals are sustainable for use by future generations and Alaska Natives need to continue to be involved in the management process

## Recommendations

During interviews and focus groups, we heard that limited resources for ANOs restrict capacity for full engagement in co-management activities. We specifically geared our recommendations towards improving co-management within the constraints of available resources, including funding. While we recognize the project was based on a subset of ANOs, we worked with our Steering Committee to develop the following recommendations (**bold text**) and action items (plain text) that we hope will be of general applicability to **federal agencies**, **ANOs**, and **communities/marine mammal resource users** for strengthening co-management.

- **Co-management partners should clearly define and mutually agree upon their respective roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms, and be more transparent regarding partner limitations, through actions such as:**
  - **Federal agency** and **ANO** leadership specifying the roles, responsibilities, goals, and expectations of all co-management staff, and including this information in revisions to co-management agreements
  - **Federal agency** outlining major decision-making processes (e.g., ESA listings) and any limitations for including ANO perspectives in decision-making
  - **Communities/resource users** working with ANOs to understand the roles and responsibilities of ANO members, and helping hold members accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities
- **Co-management partners and stakeholders should work cooperatively to strengthen communications, trust, and respect within and among partners through actions such as:**
  - **Federal agency** and **ANO** partners participating in cross-cultural awareness and communication training to help strengthen partner relationships and share expectations
  - Properly training and providing experience for **federal agency field staff** to communicate and collaborate with Alaska Native groups
  - **Federal agency staff** coordinating with ANOs to understand preferred timing, formats, and mechanisms for communicating with different communities
  - **Federal agency staff** spending more time working in communities to enhance communication, trust, and respect with ANO members and resource users
  - **Federal agency decision-makers** being fully informed of co-management activities and concerns, and regularly engaging with ANO members and other community representatives
  - **ANOs** stating expectations for timely and effective communication between ANO members and their communities



Focus group participants in Utqiagvik.



- **ANOs** informing communities of the communication responsibilities of their ANO members to enlist the help of communities in holding members accountable for timely and sufficient communication
- **ANO leadership** ensuring that newly elected community leaders are informed about ANO missions and the expectations of appointed community representatives
- **Communities** coordinating with ANOs on the preferred method of communication for co-management information
- **New generations of Alaska Natives should be exposed to and provided opportunities to engage in a range of co-management activities through actions such as:**
  - **Federal agency** and **ANO** partners forming a joint working group to identify and explore opportunities for training youth in skills related to co-management and leadership
  - **Federal agency** and **ANO** partners creating internal job shadow and volunteer opportunities, and promoting youth and new staff participation in these and other opportunities
  - **Federal agency** and **ANO** partners developing co-management history, curriculum, and training tools for use by new ANO leadership and federal agency staff
  - **ANOs** pursuing funding for Alaska Native youth involvement in co-management related activities, such as internships and fellowships, through their yearly co-management funding requests and non-federal funding opportunities (e.g., grants from foundations)
  - **Communities** supporting Alaska Native youth involvement in opportunities related to co-management and leadership
- **The effectiveness and efficiency of co-management (ANO) structures should be assessed and alternative structural models should be considered as appropriate by:**
  - **Federal agencies** investigating how alternative structural models would affect co-management partner relationships
  - **ANOs** working together to consider the structure of co-management and how well it promotes shared goals
  - **ANOs** exploring which structure(s) might be best suited for marine mammal co-management and considering changes to improve the system



Focus group participants in St. Paul.



Focus group participants in Akutan.

*Thank you to our Steering Committee, review participants, advisors, and other contributors!*

## Principal Investigators

- **Lead** - Dr. Jennafer Malek, Marine Mammal Commission, 2018 Co-management Fellow
- **Co-lead** - Victoria Cornish, Marine Mammal Commission, Energy Policy Analyst

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