



Marine Mammal Commission

An Independent Agency of the U.S. Government

Summary of Alaska Listening Sessions and Anchorage Public Meeting – February 2016

The Marine Mammal Commission held a series of public listening sessions in Alaska Arctic communities in February 2016 in lieu of its traditional annual meeting. The purpose of the listening sessions was to hear from people living in each of these communities and surrounding villages about the environmental changes they are seeing or have seen, changes in the availability of marine mammals for hunting for subsistence and handicraft purposes, and general concerns regarding marine mammals and related issues.

The listening sessions were held in Barrow, Kotzebue, and Nome and all sessions were open to the public. The Commission also met with various local officials, representatives of Alaska Native Organizations (ANOs), and tribal village members in person and by conference call. A final wrap-up public meeting/webinar was held in Anchorage. Participating in person and on the call also were representatives of federal agencies, Alaska Natives tribal members and hunters, ANOs, non-governmental organizations, Congressional staff, and members of the public.

At the Anchorage public meeting, Commission staff summarized the issues raised at each of the listening sessions, common themes heard at all sessions, and potential follow-up actions. These summaries are provided below.

Barrow

Located in the northernmost portion of Alaska at the confluence of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, Barrow is part of the North Slope Borough (NSB). The Barrow listening session was timed to immediately follow the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) Mini-Convention. While in Barrow, the Commission met with the NSB Mayor Charlotte Brower, the Native Village of Barrow, the NSB Wildlife Department, and the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, as well as attending the AEWC's Mini-Convention. The listening session included hunters representing the Native Villages of Barrow, Kivalina, Point Hope, and Point Lay. Marine mammal species that were raised in the public comments included bowhead whales and polar bears.

The major themes and concerns raised at the Barrow meetings and listening session included:

- Tribal consultation – Concerns were expressed about a lack of adequate and timely consultation by federal agencies with Alaska Native tribes, and also the need to incorporate traditional knowledge into federal agency decision-making.



Alaska Natives raised concerns about potential impacts on subsistence hunting of the implementation of the U.S./Russia Bilateral Agreement on Polar Bears.
(Photo credit: I. Stirling)

Alaska Meeting Schedule

BARROW

3 February 2016
Inupiat Heritage Center

KOTZEBUE

5 February 2016
Northwest Arctic Borough
Assembly Room

NOME

9 February 2016
UAF Northwest Campus
Main Building

ANCHORAGE

11 February 2016
William A. Egan Civic and
Convention Center

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- Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings and Critical Habitat determinations – Comments relayed the need for listing criteria that take into account the current abundance of species proposed for listing and the potential for species to adapt to changing climate. Again we heard about the need for timely consultation and also the potential impact of listings and determinations on subsistence livelihoods.
- Implementation of the U.S./Russia Bilateral Agreement on Polar Bears – There is confusion and a lack of information and consultation with Alaska Native communities on how the agreement is being implemented. There also is concern that there is inadequate scientific basis for the proposed harvest limits and “boundary change” that would be implemented as parts of the agreement. We heard about the importance of polar bear hunting in community life, and fear for its loss.
- Enforcement - Talk of new regulations raises concerns about harassment by enforcement agents. We heard stories of overzealous enforcement and insensitivity to individuals and communities. There is also the perception of a double standard between Alaska Native communities and industry on enforcement.
- Other Issues - Commercial sale of marine mammal products; impacts of shipping; culture and livelihoods; climate change; and lack of awareness of the Marine Mammal Commission and its role.



Hunters participating in the Kotzebue listening session.

Kotzebue

Located on the Chukchi Sea, Kotzebue is part of the Northwest Arctic Borough (NWAB). While in Kotzebue, the Commission met with the NWAB Mayor Clement Richards, the City of Kotzebue Mayor Gayle Ralston, the NWAB Science Department, and the Native Village of Kotzebue Environmental Protection Program. The listening session was held at the NWAB Assembly Room and included hunters representing the Native Villages of Buckland, Deering, Kotzebue, Noatak, Noorvik, and Selawik as well as representatives of local federal agencies, organizations, and members of the public. Marine mammals discussed in the public comments included beluga whales, bearded seals, ringed seals, spotted seals, walrus, and killer whales.

The major themes and concerns raised at the Kotzebue meetings and listening session included:

- Changes in weather patterns – Participants noted ice is increasingly thin, unstable, and “dirty”; there is no shorefast ice or it is late; break-up is earlier and freeze-up is later; there are stronger, more variable winds and stronger currents.
- Impacts of climate change on hunting - Beluga whales are increasingly rare in nearshore waters, making them less available to hunters; there is increasing killer whale presence that may be affecting beluga whale and walrus movements; the hunting season is more compressed (e.g., bearded seal hunt limited to one or two weeks); hunting is more dangerous on thin ice.
- Shipping - Increased open water means more vessels and uncertainty regarding how ship traffic will affect subsistence. Five of the ANO’s are developing best practices for ships entering Arctic waters through Arctic Waterways Safety Committee; we also heard that the US Coast Guard should extend the Bering Sea Port Access Route Study (PARS) to the Canadian border.
- Science/Research - Better information is needed on:
 - Killer whales, i.e., presence in Arctic, behavior, prey species
 - Aerial surveys for beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound
 - Beluga whale genetics from Russian stocks to determine extent of mixing
- Consultation/co-management –There is a need to ensure that federal agencies consult with Alaska Natives early in the process, specifically with Tribal governments. We also heard that any proposals for Marine Protected Areas in the Arctic must involve Tribal consultation early in the process. Additionally, it was noted that there is a lack of village-based federal agency contacts to provide accurate information on regulations and pending federal actions.



Hunters reported that beluga whales are increasingly harder to locate in Kotzebue Sound. (Photo credit: NOAA)

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- “Sick” seals – Lethargic seals with sores, patches of hair loss, and breathing difficulties started appearing in 2011, which prompted an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) declaration by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The sickness appeared to affect all seal species. Hunters do not use affected seals for subsistence and hairless seals are still being seen. Causal factors for the UME have yet to be determined and communication with hunters is lacking.

Nome

Located on the Bering Sea, Nome is part of the Bering Straits Region. From Nome, a small group from the Commission flew to the Native Village of Shishmaref and spoke with various community members. While in Nome, the Commission met with Nome Mayor Richard Beneville and Kawerak Inc. Conference calls were held with members of the Native Villages of Gambell, Savoonga, Diomedea, Wales, Brevig Mission, Teller, Unalakleet, and St. Michael.



Commissioner Frances Gulland presented on “Marine Mammal Health in the Arctic: The New Normal” at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Northwest Campus in Nome.

The Nome listening session was held at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Northwest Campus and included hunters representing the Native Villages of Wales, Shishmaref, and Unalakleet, as well as members of the public. Marine mammals raised in the public comments included primarily walrus, polar bears, bowhead whales, beluga whales, bearded seals, ringed seals, and spotted seals.

The major themes and concerns raised at the Nome meetings, conference calls, and listening session included:

- Climate Change - Ice conditions and winds are increasingly unpredictable; weather changes are creating safety concerns and limiting access to marine mammals; there are concerns about food security and safety of consuming marine mammals.
- Impacts on Subsistence - The seal UME was the first UME declared for a subsistence species. A lack of subsistence resources will have profound impacts on traditional culture, and there is a need for flexibility on when and where hunting can occur.
- Communication Issues - Agencies do not consult/communicate adequately with Native communities or do so late in the process. Agencies need to consult with the hunters, not just the leaders in the “hub” communities. There is a lack of communication on issues affecting Native communities, e.g., the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (FWS) proposed polar bear harvest limit; reliance on the Federal Register and website postings are not sufficient.
- Walrus – There is concern that a potential ESA listing may lead to limits on hunting and other activities, and that FWS is not consulting adequately with Native Villages about the listing. Walrus appear to be plentiful, but ice conditions are preventing access to hunters. Clearer guidance is needed on issues such as wasteful take and handicraft uses.
- Enforcement - Agency presence in villages is focused on enforcement, and unclear guidance has led to unintentional violations. Weather-related safety concerns need to be considered. Penalties under federal law appear to be more severe than under state law, and prior offenses unrelated to marine mammals are being considered in sentencing. Interpretations of the hunting rules appear to vary by agency, and enforcement officials are over-zealous. The question was raised as to whether Native Villages or organizations could be playing a role in enforcement (as does the AEWC).
- Strandings/Health Concerns - Alaska needs a more extensive stranding network. Beach stranded animals are seen by Alaska Native communities as food sources, not something to investigate. Hunters are concerned that animals that look normal may be diseased or contaminated, and there is no testing being done. Better guidance is needed on how to handle stranded animals as the UME has people worried about safety of consuming stranded marine mammals.



Pacific walrus are being considered for listing under the ESA.
(Photo credit: U.S. Geological Survey)

Themes Common to All Listening Sessions

- Climate change and its impacts on hunting of marine mammals
- Enhancing communication/consultation between federal agencies and Alaska Native communities
- Potential impacts of ESA listings and critical habitat determinations on Alaska Native communities
- Health of marine mammals and concerns about impacts on subsistence use
- Increasing ship traffic and potential impacts
- Traditional knowledge and its incorporation into federal decision-making

Potential follow-up/action items

A number of potential follow-up/action items were discussed at the Anchorage public meeting, all of which are now being considered further by the Commission. They included:

- Enhancing communication
 - Designate a Commission Alaska Native Liaison
 - Expand the Commission's outreach efforts, including social media
 - Schedule regular visits to Alaska Native communities
- Marine Mammal Health
 - Facilitate/coordinate meetings of key players and hunting communities
 - Communicate results of research, analysis, and other information
- Co-management review
 - Conduct a formal review of one or more co-management agreements
 - Work with the relevant federal agency(ies) and ANO(s) to agree on review criteria, process, and timing
- ESA and Critical Habitat
 - Request that federal agencies “front load” consultation early in the process
 - Work with other federal agencies to clarify impact of ESA listing and Critical Habitat on subsistence hunting
- Chukchi Polar Bear Regulations
 - Support the collection and dissemination of mortality data
 - Clarify harvest data and relative size of cap
 - Ensure ample time for updated analyses and communication/consultation prior to issuance of proposed rule
- Other Ideas
 - Host an Alaska Native intern
 - Promote additional research on beluga whales and other Arctic species
 - Clarify process for designating marine protected areas and potential impact on subsistence hunt
 - Determine how disaster declarations might be applied to protect subsistence hunting



Marine Mammal Commission "Alaska Team" (left to right): Randall Reeves, Michael Tillman, Vicki Cornish, Rebecca Lent, Daryl Boness, Michael Gosliner, Frances Gulland, and Peter Thomas

The Commission would like to thank the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, the Northwest Arctic Borough, and the University of Alaska at Fairbanks Northwest Campus, and the Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals (IPCoMM) for the use of their facilities and assistance with logistics. A copy of the agenda and presentation made at the Anchorage public meeting/webinar, which includes summaries of the public listening sessions and potential follow-up actions, is available at: www.mmc.gov under Meetings and Events → Annual Meetings → 2016 Arctic Listening Sessions.