

ICE SEAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



Ice Seal Committee
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Anchorage, Alaska

ICE SEAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

Four species of ice-associated seals, bearded (*Erignathus barbatus*), ribbon (*Histiophoca fasciata*), ringed (*Phoca hispida*), and spotted (*Phoca largha*) seals, inhabit the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas in the Alaskan Arctic. Collectively, they are known as ice seals and are vital resources for Alaska Native communities, as well as key ecological components of Arctic marine ecosystems. Ice seals are highly dependent on suitable sea ice conditions and distribution, and therefore may be particularly vulnerable to climatic change, offshore oil development, or other environmental impacts that could alter their habitat. Further studies are needed to document the seals' population status, stock structure, trends in abundance, seasonal movements, diving behavior, life history, diet, and harvest rates.

Ice seals are hunted in coastal Alaska from Bristol Bay to the Beaufort Sea and are an important traditional subsistence resource in many, if not all, coastal villages.

Ice seal hunters, tribes, and researchers have become more concerned about ice seals because of several recent events:

- Reduction in sea ice habitat associated with climate change
- Changes in snow and ice cover of arctic waters
- Offshore oil & gas development
- Increased ship traffic
- Environmental contamination
- Natural predation, prey availability and noise protection

Representatives from the five ice seal hunting regions (Bristol Bay, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Bering Straits, Northwest Arctic & Arctic Slope), National Marine Fisheries Service, and other interested parties, organized the Ice Seal Committee in 2003 to address ice seal concerns. A co-management agreement was signed with National Marine Fisheries Service in 2006. The Ice Seal Committee (Bristol Bay Native Association, Association of Village Council Presidents, Kawerak, Inc., Maniilaq Association, and the North Slope Borough) is dedicated to ice seal conservation, habitat protection, and preservation of the traditional ice seal subsistence harvest. The means to achieve these goals is through ice seal co-management between hunters and the National Marine Fisheries Service, and through self regulation by hunter groups. This management plan outlines the principles by which the members of the Ice Seal Committee will manage ice seals.

ICE SEAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

- I. **CONSERVATION:** Maintain healthy ice seal resources for subsistence use and public enjoyment by future generations.
- II. **HARVEST:** Encourage the safe and efficient harvest, processing, and use of ice seals; and reduce the number of struck and lost ice seals through regional management plans.
- III. **USE:** Ensure that ice seals are used as fully as possible, in a non-wasteful manner.
- IV. **REPORTING and MONITORING:** Obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each region in order to provide information needed to make sound management decisions.
- V. **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT:** Educate and promote understanding about ice seal issues among subsistence harvesters, users, resource managers, and other interested parties.
- VI. **RESEARCH:** Obtain biological information necessary for sound management and conservation of ice seals; and incorporate appropriate traditional ecological knowledge.
- VII. **ENFORCEMENT:** Oversee enforcement of regional management plans and hunting guidelines; promote enforcement of habitat protection laws, in order to maintain healthy ice seal populations for future generations; and ensure hunting opportunities for the subsistence users.

MANAGEMENT PLAN GOALS

- Maintain healthy ice seal populations in Alaska waters
- Provide for adequate subsistence harvest of ice seals
- Protect hunting privileges for Alaska Native subsistence hunters

I. ICE SEAL CONSERVATION

Goal - Maintain healthy ice seal populations for subsistence use and public enjoyment by future generations.

- A. Habitat protection
 - i. Identify and protect areas that are important for pupping, , feeding, migrating, and other biological processes.
 - ii. Identify important habitat concentration areas and suggest ways to mitigate impacts from industrial and commercial activities in these areas.
- B. Subsistence harvest
 - i. Base harvest levels on population abundances and cultural, traditional and nutritional needs.
 - ii. Without adequate biological information, the harvest will be based on current community needs
- C. Industrial and commercial activities
 - i. Identify and monitor activities that may adversely affect ice seal populations and the ability for subsistence users to hunt ice seals
 - ii. Provide recommendations to minimize effects upon ice seals and hunting
- D. Information exchange
 - i. Encourage the international exchange of information
- E. Management plans
 - i. Develop joint management plans for shared ice seal stocks
 - ii. Encourage and assist regions to develop regional management plans
- F. Disease and health monitoring of the ice seal population

II. ICE SEAL HARVEST

Goal - Encourage the safe and efficient harvest, processing, and use of ice seals; and reduce the number of struck and lost seals through regional management plans

- A. Subsistence harvest
 - i. Establish harvest guidelines for ice seals by the communities' needs
 - ii. Establish requirements needed to keep the number of struck and lost ice seals to a minimum
 - iii. Determine subsistence uses of ice seals in each region
 - iv. The ISC supports local efforts to maintain a cultural ethic of avoiding waste and unnecessary loss, so that all harvest goes towards community cultural and nutritional needs.

III. ICE SEAL USE

Goal – Ensure that ice seals are used in a non-wasteful manner

- A. Ice seal use
 - i. Local consumption is the first priority, which includes traditional and customary uses
 - i. Includes sharing, bartering, and customary trade in ice seal products with other Alaska Natives that are non-commercial in nature
 - ii. Other legal uses maybe allowed if affected villages and the Ice Seal Committee are consulted and the subsistence priority is met. Affected communities need to be consulted, involved, and approve and support the use
 - i. Research
 - ii. Live capture (as approved by the ISC)
 - iii. Tourism
 - iii. The ISC prohibits the re-introduction of rehabilitated marine mammals into subsistence populations of marine mammals.

IV. ICE SEAL REPORTING AND MONITORING

Goal - Obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each region in order to provide the information needed to make sound management decisions.

- A. Harvest reporting and monitoring
 - i. Regional representatives will report all harvested and struck and lost ice seal information to the Ice Seal Committee Information will be used to assist in making management decisions
 - ii. Forms will be completed, whenever possible, that will identify: species, gender, age (jaw), morphometrics, , hunting area, and hunting effort
 - iii. Harvest monitors will be hired from villages, whenever possible
 - i. They will collect harvest information, measure harvested ice seals, and collect biological samples
 - iv. Hunters will cooperate with harvest monitors and provide harvest data and harvest samples
 - v. Harvest surveys shall not overburden rural residents or regional, tribal, state, and local Alaska Native Organizations. Therefore, sampling schemes will be designated to limit the burden.

V. ICE SEAL OUTREACH

Goal - Educate and promote understanding about ice seal issues among users, resource managers, and other interested groups

- A. Promote hunter education
 - i. Improve hunting, harvest methods, and harvest reports
- B. Involve users and others
 - i. Who will participate in planning, prioritizing, and conducting research and in making regulations and management decisions
- C. Provide information to the public, appropriate resource management agencies, and/or other interested parties
- D. Serve as a contact for information exchange about ice seals
- E. Establish a training program to directly involve local people in harvest monitoring, collecting biological samples, and research.

VI. ICE SEAL RESEARCH

Goal - Obtain biological information and traditional ecological knowledge necessary for sound management and ice seal conservation

- A. The Ice Seal Committee recommends the following biological studies:
 - i. Determine ice seal stocks in Alaska
 - ii. Determine population abundances
 - iii. Develop population models for each ice seal stock
 - iv. Create models using the following information: population size, birth rate, gender composition, age composition, age at sexual maturity, and mortality
 - v. Determine effects of man-made disturbance and noise
 - vi. Determine stock movements (migration patterns)
 - vii. Identify critical areas for pupping, migration, and feeding
 - viii. Examine the interactions between fisheries and ice seals
 - ix. Determine harmful contaminants
 - x. Monitor the prevalence of disease in the ice seal population
 - xi. Compile and incorporate traditional ecological knowledge on ice seals into proposed and current research activities
 - xii. In the absence of biological information on sustainable harvest levels, and to minimize the burden on subsistence users, the ISC recommends further research on biological indicators of potential future population declines, such as poor body condition or changes in distribution.

- B. The Ice Seal Committee recommends the following subsistence studies:
 - i. Document ice seal use, how they are hunted, and their cultural and subsistence importance to ice seal hunting communities in Alaska.
 - ii. Identify user groups (subsistence and non-consumptive users).
 - iii. Compile information on ice seal harvest on hunting locations, , hours, methods, etc.
 - iv. Conduct a feasibility study, upon request, on other potential uses of ice seals, including tourism and live capture (as approved by the ISC).

VII. ICE SEAL ENFORCEMENT

Goal - Oversee enforcement of regional management plans and hunting guidelines; and promote habitat protection laws to maintain healthy ice seal populations for future generations and to ensure future hunting opportunities for subsistence users.

- A. Establish enforcement procedures
 - i. For each region, through consultation with the Ice Seal Committee
 - i. Regional plans and for other agreements entered into with management agencies
- B. The Ice Seal Committee will hold a special hearing if there is an infraction left unresolved at the regional level.
 - i. The Ice Seal Committee will decide the penalty of any infraction in a timely manner
- C. If a person or entity willfully disregards the decisions made by the Ice Seal Committee, the infraction will be referred to National Marine Fisheries Service, Office of Law Enforcement

