

Harvest Monitoring Services, Subsistence Harvest of Northern Fur Seals on St. George Island, AK

2017



Harvesters waiting to harvest 11/7/2018



Village of Saint George, Alaska 11/1/2018

The U.S. Department of the Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Alaska Region Pribilof Program Office managed the 2017 Northern Fur Seal Pup Harvest on St. George Island with the assistance of Harvest Observers from InupiaQ Alaska Group, LLC, who worked closely with the St. George Tribal Government representatives.

Harvest report for
the 2017 Season
September 15 to
November 30, 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Laaqdaax, Unangan for northern fur seal pup (*Callorhinus ursinus*), is a customarily and culturally harvested food source for the Unangan of St. George Island, Alaska for centuries. It is also considered to be their ceremonial dish to share with friends, family or visitors to honor them, the animal, the harvest and their culture. Harvesting from the land and the sea is an important necessity where there are very few other food sources for this remote island that receives a few small grocery shipments per month. The Traditional Council of St. George (STG) together with the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), coordinated, monitored, and managed the subsistence harvest of northern fur seals to safeguard their existence. The 2017 subsistence pup fur seal harvest was conducted in accordance to 50 CFR §216 Subpart F on St. George Island.

II. CRITERIA FOR HARVEST MONITORING AND OBSERVER REPORTING

During the 2017 subsistence fur seal harvest, the below data for items a-i were specified for observed harvests. Items a-e are presented in Table 1 below. Items f-h, along with additional data added to those specified in the NMFS template, are included in Exhibits A and B at the end of this report.

- a. Date
- b. Location
- c. Weather conditions
- d. Disturbance Start and end times
- e. Number of young seals taken
- f. Number and disposition of samples collected – No samples were taken for the 2017 Harvest.
- g. Number of seals released after determination of sex
- h. Number of non-young of the year seals in round up
- i. Recommendations for improvements to the conduct of the harvest

The below additional criteria, for items j-q, were monitored and reported based on the specifications from NMFS. These items are additionally addressed in the narrative below.

- j. Incidence of by-products and waste during the harvest process
- k. Female seals killed or injured during the harvest operation
- l. Number of seal deaths due to overheating
- m. Number of seals entangled in marine debris and the number of seals disentangled
- n. Evidence of oil contaminated seal pelts
- o. Other types of fur seal mortality
- p. Attempted harvest and/or other unusual conditions related to the harvest
- q. Research conducted during the harvest

III. NARRATIVE OF RESULTS

A. Training/Planning: No harvest planning was able to be conducted and there was no training conducted of a new observer this year due to flight impacts during the designated training dates of September 22-30, 2017. The backup consultant observer was able to provide one week's coverage

to allow the primary consultant, Ms. Meyer to get to the mainland. Due to severe weather and associated flight impacts, Ms. Meyer remaining in an overlap situation with the backup consultant for longer periods than planned and continued to assist the tagging crews on 9/26/2017.

Ms. Meyer conducted a harvester’s meeting at Cottage C on 10/5/2017. Due to the unexpected death of a tribal member, a few of the harvesters departed the island the next day.

B. Harvest Monitoring: The regulations authorize Pribilovians on St. George to harvest northern fur seal pups from September 15 to November 30, 2017, with the first harvest taking place on September 19th and the final harvest on November 20th. A total of 50 northern fur young of the year seals were harvested during the 2017 season. 13 harvests were conducted in the two and a half month period. Table 1 below provides a summary of the harvests including items a-e above. More detail is available from the individual Pup Harvest Daily Reports.

C. Sampling: No samples were collected/tested during this harvest period. This responds to item f of the NMFS reporting specifications template.

D. Reporting: (a-e are addressed in the table below). The area west of the East Reef Haul Out is a new area occupied by seals this year which proved to be an area easier for the harvest group to harvest in and reduce disturbance to the seals. The East Reef Haul Out is a large field where seals haul out east and west of the gate. Another harvest area was near the stand in the East Reef Haul Out. Refer to the map at Exhibit B for NW Rookery Section 5.

DATE	LOCATION	WEATHER	TIMES	# OF FEMALE SEALS RELEASED	# OF SEALS TAKEN
09/19/17	west of the East Reef Haul Out	Wind: SW @ 10 Temp: 46	Start: 01:37 PM End: 01:48 PM	4	5
09/22/17	west of the East Reef Haul Out	Wind: NE @ 10 Temp: 46	Start: 01:33 PM End: 01:36 PM	0	2
09/28/17	west of the East Reef Haul Out	Wind: NW @ 15 Temp: 48	Start: 01:30 PM End: 01:47 PM	5	8
10/06/17	west of the East Reef Haul Out	Wind: NW @ 15 Temp: 46	Start: 01:22 PM End: 01:27 PM	4	4
10/17/17	NW Rookery Section 5	Wind: NW @ 25 Temp: 42	Start: 01:56 PM End: 02:07 PM	3	5
10/23/17	near stand at East Reef Haul Out	Wind: NW @ 12 Temp: 33	Start: 01:26 PM End: 01:29 PM	0	1
10/30/17	NW Rookery Section 5	Wind: NW @ 26 Temp: 40	Start: 01:30 PM End: 01:37 PM	4	3
11/01/17	near stand at East Reef Haul Out	Wind: SE @ 12 Temp: 41	Start: 01:21 PM End: 01:33 PM	4	2

11/07/17	NW Rookery Section 5	Wind: SW @ 17 Temp: 40	Start: 01:33 PM End: 01:42 PM	3	4
11/10/17	near stand at East Reef Haul Out	Wind: W @ 20 Temp: 43	Start: 01:55 PM End: 01:59 PM	3	4
11/13/17	near stand at East Reef Haul Out	Wind: SE @ 25 Temp: 44	Start: 01:36 PM End: 01:44 PM	2	4
11/15/17	near stand at East Reef Haul Out	Wind: W @ 20 Temp: 42	Start: 01:28 PM End: 01:31 PM	2	3
11/20/17	near stand at East Reef Haul Out	Wind: S @ 12 Temp: 38	Start: 01:30 PM End: 01:39 PM	0	6
			Total	34	50

Table 1: Specified Data for Observed Harvests

f. Number and disposition of samples collected. No scientific samples were collected during the 2017 Harvest.

g. Number of seals released after determination of sex: Harvesters handled, sexed, and released 34 female pups. Harvesters are able to predict sex without handling and release seal pups they suspect are females based on other criteria such as canine tooth shape, head shape, and size. This approach reduces the risks of handling to harvesters and seals, but results in a greater number of seals being “released” or escaping. Handling and sexing seal pups is the most dangerous aspect of the harvest for people being bitten by seals and seals being bitten by one another or injured during handling as a result of biting the handlers in sensitive or unprotected locations.

h. Number of non-young of the year seals in round up: The observer attempted to collect this data in 2017, but staffing constraints and actual harvest conditions did not allow reliable collection of this data. The intent of collecting this data was to understand and evaluate which harvest sites or times reduces harassment to adults or non-pups. The observer estimated harvesters rounded up about 216 pups in 2017 to harvest 50 pups on St. George.

i. Recommendations for improvements to the conduct of the harvest:

(1) Observation: During one of the harvests, a harvester unnecessarily harassed an adult male seal by aggressively approaching the seal with a four-wheeler. The number of people required is site specific, as some sites have terrain or access characteristics, which allow a safe harvest with fewer people than other sites. There are enough local people to support the pup harvest, but many chose to not participate for reasons that include (a) an aversion to using clubs and (b) the physicality needed to harvest. The few who did participate were running on the rocks and in water to gather, corral and sex the seals, and club the seals. Each year, less harvesters participate but there are the same number of local people relying on the harvest.

(2) Recommendation: NMFS and the Traditional Council of St. George should use the co-management council and process to identify the best approach to ensuring the harvest is safe for

harvesters, consistent with the regulations, and meets the subsistence needs of the community. Based on experience working with harvesters and researchers there are a few tasks that can be identified to understand the minimum number of people needed for a safe harvest. Two people are needed to safely and efficiently prevent seals from escaping into the water. This requires speed and fitness to run over uneven terrain between the seals and the water. Once the crew prevents seals from escaping they need to be herded into an area where they can be handled and sexed. Site-specific details (e.g., a cliff or large driftwood log) can allow easier seal group maintenance, but at least three people are required to maintain a group of seal pups. A fourth person is required to capture, handle, and sex the seals. If the people holding the group have to capture and handle seals, this often results in seals escaping around that person. We suggest a minimum of four participants are necessary to herd, handle and, determine the sex of seal pups. The community needs to identify more volunteers to participate in the harvest process to ensure it is conducted safely, is able to meet the subsistence needs of the community, and be conducted consistent with the harvest regulatory requirements.

j. Incidence of by-products and waste during the harvest process: None observed. The prior two years' of harvest observations, captured in those years' final reports, established a baseline for the noticeable increase in retaining and caring for the hides from the harvested seals this year. Hides with holes or molting hides were discarded.

k. Female seals killed or injured during the harvest operation: None

l. Number of seal deaths due to overheating: None

m. Number of seals entangled in marine debris and the number of seals disentangled: None

n. Evidence of oil-contaminated seal pelts: None

o. Other types of fur seal mortality: None

p. Attempted harvest and/or other unusual conditions related to the harvest: Several scheduled harvests were cancelled due to severe weather or no one showing up due to poor weather. In each case, harvests were cancelled before deploying to the harvest locations.

One harvest was attempted on 9/18/2017 at the area below the village that is not a rookery and is an old dock near the washhouse. Eight seals were captured and sexed but were all females. We were operating in an area surrounded with old concrete and exposed rebar used for seal hiding areas and was not a safe area to operate.

q. Research conducted during the harvest: None

IV. LOGISTICS SUPPORTING OBSERVER TASKING

The village elders called for the last harvest to be 11/20/2017.

V. LIST OF EXHIBITS

Exhibit A – Sample Results (no samples were taken this harvest period)

Exhibit B – Photos with Captions