Evaluation of
Simeonof Island National Sea Otter Refuge, Alaska

for eligibility for
REGISTERED NATURAL LANDMARK
designation

prepared by
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SIMONOF NATIONAL SEA OTTER REFUGE

Introduction.

During Russia's ownership of Alaska, the sea otter was exploited for its fine fur (the highest quality fur in the World) with no thought of conservation or wise use; this slaughter continued for many years after the territory became the property of the United States. Only because the few remaining animals were widely scattered was the species saved from extinction. Today, after years of intelligent management and the establishment of the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, this fur bearer is increasing steadily and can be said to be well reestablished. Laws and protected areas, under the direction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, were the major influences in this recovery. Simeonof National Wildlife Refuge, an addition to the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, was established in 1948 and was instrumental in the success of the program in that particular segment of the sea otter population.

This report is the result of study of the literature, personal interviews, and an inspection of the area by James A. Blaisdell, Regional Wildlife Management Biologist. A flight to the Island was accomplished on June 18, 1968, at which time the habitat as well as many sea otters were observed.
Location.

Simeonof Island is one of the Shumagin Group south of the Alaska Peninsula. It is located at 54°, 54' North Latitude and 159°, 16' West Longitude. The nearest place of human habitation is at Fort Moller approximately 90 miles to the northwest.

Size.

The refuge consists of 10,442 acres of land and water, which includes a one-mile protected zone surrounding the island. This strip of shoal water and rocks was included to make available to the Shumagin sea otter population, the habitat and protection necessary for their reproduction and survival. Just offshore, and within the one-mile zone, lie the Murie Islets, also important to the sea otters.

Ownership.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife has jurisdiction over the area, with grazing by cattle being controlled by permit from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Although relatively remote, visitation for study and observation is permitted and welcomed.

Correspondents.

Information relative to the area may be obtained from Mr. David Spencer, Associate Supervisor of Wildlife Refuges, Bureau of Sport Fisheries.
and Wildlife, Kenai, Alaska 99611, and from Mr. Robert Jones, Refuge Manager, Cold Bay, Alaska 99771.

Land Use.
The present land use is primarily for and by wildlife, with the sea otter being the most important user. The area is an established wildlife refuge, but is open to hunting under State Regulations. Sea otter harvests, if and when necessary, are carried out by the State. The higher levels of the Island which are not needed by the sea otters are presently grazed under Bureau of Land Management permit by cattle. This activity is closely supervised, and resource values are not being damaged. Presently, only one permittee has cattle on the Island, and the allotment is insignificant.

Dangers to the Integrity of the Area.
Due mainly to its relative remoteness, there is no imminent danger to the integrity of the area. This remoteness adds to the difficulty of patrol, however, and fur seekers possibly could become more interested in attempting trespass in the years to come. State law forbids the take of sea otters, and loss of a hunter's boat is a possible punishment. This has definite deterrent effect upon illegal harvest. Livestock use will be watched closely so no danger of impairment exists from that use.
Description of Natural Values.

The shorelines and waters provide ideal habitat for a large segment of the sea otters found in the Shumagin Island group. Most recent population estimates obtained from the Fish and Wildlife Service place the sea otter population of the refuge in the hundreds. Enjoyment of the animals by the visiting public as well as the knowledge that such protection is afforded these once nearly extinct creatures speaks well for this type of management. The availability of the Island for use by other marine mammals and sea birds is also considered a valuable contribution to conservation. Hunting is allowed though not practised to any extent; consequently, wildlife may be observed, photographed and studied with relative ease. Access to the area is by boat or chartered amphibian or sea plane.

Flora includes mosses, crowberry, grasses and sedges. Beach rye grass is the principal plant on offshore islets and some of the lowland areas adjoining the beaches of Simeonof. Willows, salmonberries and two small introduced spruce constitute the woody vegetation.

Fauna consists of sea otters, introduced blue foxes, Steller's sea lions, harbor seals, ground squirrels and a small avifauna.
The Island is granite, overlain by a thin layer of soil. It is in two parts connected only by a narrow strip of white sand. The high ground (highest 1,436 feet) is located centrally with gentle slopes leading to coastal lowlands. This is in strong contrast with the steep rocky terrain of most other islands of the Shumagin Group in which it is located.

A marine ecology dominates the area; however, Simeonof is far enough south of the Alaska Peninsula to have a significantly higher growing season temperature which makes the Island suitable for certain agricultural pursuits. It has been intermittently occupied by humans for most of the period since 1880 with cattle production a principal source of income. Garden products, sea otters, and blue foxes figured in the economy at different periods in the Island's history. Cattle and a few horses are currently grazing Simeonof. A dock and several buildings are situated adjacent to the north end of the harbor.

Eligibility for Landmark Status.

Although there are areas to the west in the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge where sea otter populations reach larger proportions, Simeonof Island was set aside with the express idea of protecting the slowly increasing sea otter pods in the smaller Shumagin Group of islands. It also may be a prime factor in the spreading of the population to the east along the Alaska Peninsula toward the
Alaska Coast. Here, in one small area, can be told the story of a nearly extirpated species and the successful management tools used to restore it, an outstanding example which could be considered under Theme III, Subtheme II.

However, in discussing with local experts the significance of Simonof as a primary cause for the preservation and population increase of the sea otter in the Aleutians as a whole, it was their unanimous opinion that this island should not be given that distinction. It was suggested that the Delarof Islands and Amchitka Island (now an AEC test site) were where the last of the sea otters had a foothold and where they first began increasing again under Federal protection. The Sanak Reefs and Sandman Reefs (Sandman not a part of Aleutian Islands Refuge) may also have been of great importance in the return of the sea otter.

Recommendation.
It is recommended that the entry of Simonof Island National Wildlife Refuge into the National Registry of Natural Landmarks be temporarily postponed until studies can be completed to ascertain the importance to sea otters of the Delarof Islands, Amchitka Island, and Sanak and Sandman Reefs.

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References


Photographs

Blaisdell, James A., Western Regional Office, National Park Service
SIMEONOF ISLAND
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
CANDIDATE WILDERNESS AREA

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE