

PROJECT TITLE: WALRUS ISLANDS STATE GAME SANCTUARY ANNUAL REPORT

REPORT PERIOD: 01 JANUARY - 31 DECEMBER 1991

PROJECT LOCATION: GMU 17A (Northern Bristol Bay)

PROJECT GOALS:

The management goals of the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary are:

- 1) to protect walruses and other wildlife within the Sanctuary;
- 2) to provide an opportunity for scientific and educational study of walruses; and,
- 3) to provide an opportunity to view, photograph and enjoy walruses.

WORK ACCOMPLISHED DURING THE PROJECT SEGMENT PERIOD:

1) Two Wildlife Technicians were stationed on Round Island from 29 APR 91 to 28 AUG 91. During this period they noted 13 violations of Sanctuary access restrictions (9 boats within the 3-mile restricted zone and 4 aircraft within 1/2 mile of the island). Whenever possible, violators were contacted, informed of their infraction and asked to leave. No citations were issued.

In addition to these instances, large fishing vessels were commonly observed and heard within 12 miles of Round Island. Noise generated by these vessels is suspected to adversely affect walruses that use the island. The U.S. Coast Guard reportedly seized 8 vessels associated with the yellow-fin sole trawl fishery for violating the 12-mile closed area around Round Island. Fines up to \$200,000 were levied against the owners of these vessels. In August the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council voted to continue the 12-mile closed area indefinitely, with review of the regulation scheduled for 1996.

2) Staff conducted daily counts of walruses hauled-out on the east side of Round Island and conducted island-wide counts whenever weather permitted. Daily counts were conducted within 2 hours of low tide. The peak walrus count during 1991 occurred on 5 JUL 91 with 4637 walruses observed. This peak was considerably lower than the 5 yr average of 7190, and is comparable to the peaks observed in 1987 and 1988 (prior to the 12-mile closed area) (Figure 1). Coincidentally, in 1991 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) personnel at Cape Peirce observed the largest walrus peak (3968) since 1988. Round Island and Cape Peirce are

suspected to be used as alternate haul-outs by the Bristol Bay walrus population, with Cape Peirce receiving greater use when walruses are disturbed away from Round Island. During 1991 these disturbances may have been caused by the increased activity of large vessels associated with the yellow-fin sole fishery.

Sea lions continued to use beaches and ledges along East Cape throughout the 1991 field season. Staff counted the lions daily, in conjunction with walrus counts. The peak number observed was 357 on 27 MAY 91. Data collected in 1991 may not be comparable to those collected in previous years because a new count area was included. One pair of sea lions were observed copulating on 28 JUN 91. Two pups were born on the island. One was found dead of unknown causes. The other was born on 22 MAY 91 and was last observed on 7 AUG 91. No direct mortalities of sea lion were observed, however there were 11 sightings of lions with debris around their necks and there were 4 individuals had severe eye injuries. Flipper tags were observed on 2 lions. These were the first sightings of tags affixed by researchers from National Marine Fisheries Service on sea lions at rookeries on Unimak and Bogoslof Islands.

Other research activities included documentation of disturbances to walruses on the island, continuation of monitoring for VHF transmitters placed on walruses by USFWS in 1990, seabird productivity documentation, and incidental observations of red fox abundance and productivity.

3) A total of 182 visitors stayed for a cumulative 491 visitor-days on Round Island during the 1991 season. There were 111 day-use visitors and 71 campers (mean length of stay = 5.25 days). Total number of visitors was comparable to recent years (Figure 2) (5 yr average = 197.4). Total visitor days was considerably lower than the 5-yr average (579 days) as was the number of campers (5 yr average = 102.0). The number of day use visitors was higher than the 5 yr average (95.4).

This was the first year that a user fee was charged for Round Island access permits. The fee for day-use permits was \$10 and a 5-day camping permit was \$50. Camping permits were available on a first-come-first-served basis at Dillingham and day use permits were available both in Dillingham and from the staff on Round Island.

All campers used the services of Don's Round Island Boat Charter to access the island. Day-use visitors used a variety of means of access, including 2 groups that arrived by helicopter after receiving incorrect information from ADF&G in Dillingham. There were no major accidents to visitors during the 1991 field season.

A formal visitor questionnaire was administered by the department during 1991. Each camper was given a multi-page form and asked to share their views on Sanctuary management, the quality of

their experience on Round Island, and suggestions for improvement. Data from these questionnaires will be analyzed and used in the upcoming management plan for the Sanctuary.

Visitor facilities were maintained, but no significant improvements were made. A new visitor outhouse was constructed to replace old one that was destroyed over the winter. A new trail was delineated around First Beach to minimize disturbances to walruses in that area. A new inflatable raft and 15 hp outboard motor were purchased.

PROGRESS TOWARDS MEETING GOALS:

Continued use of the waters around Round Island by large vessels associated with the yellow-fin sole fishery and the coincidental decline in the peak number of walruses using the island's beaches is a major concern. Actions by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the U.S. Coast Guard should help to dissuade future violations. The department will continue to monitor walrus numbers in future years as well as document violations of sanctuary restrictions.

To further minimize disturbances, efforts will be made to reduce the number of trips made to the island by Winkelman's charter boat. This will be accomplished by giving permittees more restrictive guidelines on starting and ending dates of their permits. Efforts to reduce overflights of the island will be aimed at developing written policies on when helicopters and aircraft can approach the island and how violations will be handled. A joint ADF&G/USFWS effort is planned to cite violators under provisions of the Marine Mammals Protection Act. The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration will be requested to revise their aviation charts to show a 3-mile closed area around Round Island to be consistent with the closure of marine waters.

ADF&G and USFWS continue to work closely in managing walruses and their habitat in Bristol Bay. USFWS contracted the department to continue monitoring radio-tagged walrus and collect specific data on walrus numbers and beach conditions. Field crews on Round Island and Cape Peirce were in daily radio contact, exchanging information on walruses, sea lions, and sea birds. ADF&G personnel assisted Togiak National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) staff in monitoring sea lion haul-outs at Cape Newenham for a week in June and they helped refuge staff in developing a visitor use plan for Cape Peirce. Future plans are to continue this level of cooperation and formalize it in the Togiak NWR marine mammal inventory plan.

The visitor program on Round Island is continuing to evolve. Visitor demands on the staff are increasing. New user-fees and a

reduction in the length of camping permits from 7 to 5 days may have been responsible for the decline in the number of campers in 1991. Numbers will probably increase in future years as Round Island continues to get worldwide exposure by professional writers and photographers that visit the island. The Alaska Division of Tourism has also expressed an interest in promoting Round Island as an "eco-tour". Questions about how to manage visitors and what level of services to provide will continue to challenge the department. Current management directions are to retain the current maximum level of visitor use (12 campers per 5 day period and 15 day use visitors per day) and to provide only those services necessary to provide reasonable health and safety while preserving the wilderness nature of the island.

Funding continues to be a major concern. Recent allocations are inadequate to maintain the program at its current level. If the visitor program is to continue and grow, supplemental funding will be necessary. User fees will be of some assistance, however, the program cannot be expected to be self-sufficient because of the relatively low "visitor carrying-capacity" and the high cost of operating in a remote location. ~~Sales of beach-found ivory by the Eskimo Walrus Commission (proceeds go to the Walrus Research and Management Fund) also provide a source of supplemental funding for operating supplies, but these funds will not be used for personnel costs. Contributions through the newly established Wildlife Trust Fund may provide funding in the future, but these revenues are yet to be realized. The department should strive to develop a consistent source of adequate funding either with appropriations from the legislature or through joint long-term funding agreements with USFWS. Adequate, consistent funding is vital to maintaining the integrity of the Sanctuary.~~

SEGMENT PERIOD PROJECT COSTS:

The following project costs are for FY91 (1 JUL 90 - 30 JUN 91).

	<u>Personnel</u>	<u>Operating</u>	<u>Total</u>
Planned	33.6 ^a	11.9 ^b	45.5
Actual	40.6	11.1	51.7
<u>Difference^c</u>	<u>-7.0</u>	<u>+0.8</u>	<u>-6.2</u>

a - includes \$7.0 provided by a USFWS contract.

b - includes \$1.4 provided by the Walrus Research & Management budget.

c - difference was due to personnel costs that were higher than anticipated because of overtime payments and cost-of-living adjustments in salaries and benefits.



VISITOR NUMBERS

ROUND ISLAND, 1977 - 1991

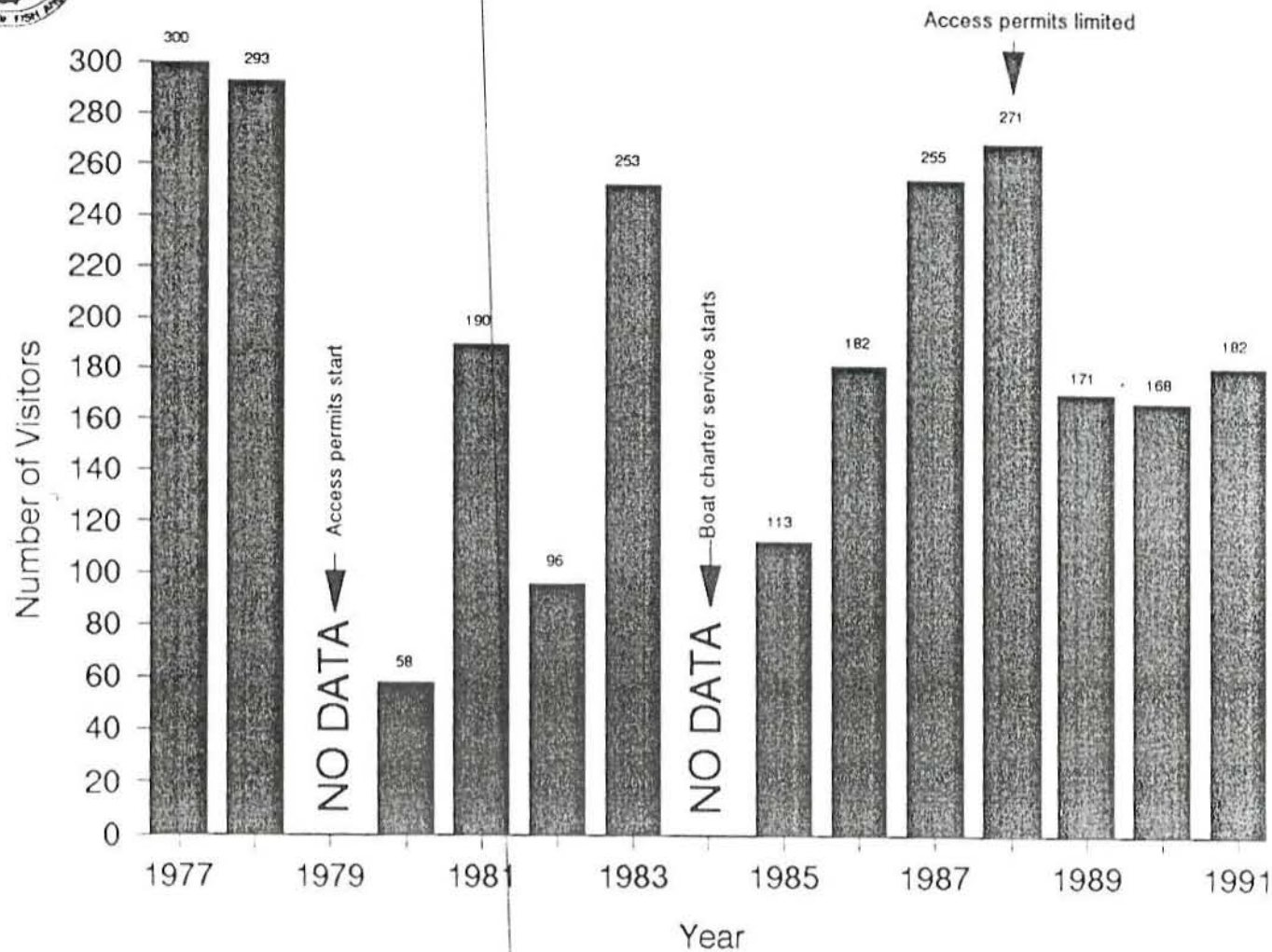


Figure 2. Annual number of visitors to Round Island, Alaska, 1977-1991.



PEAK WALRUS COUNTS

ROUND ISLAND, 1975 - 1991

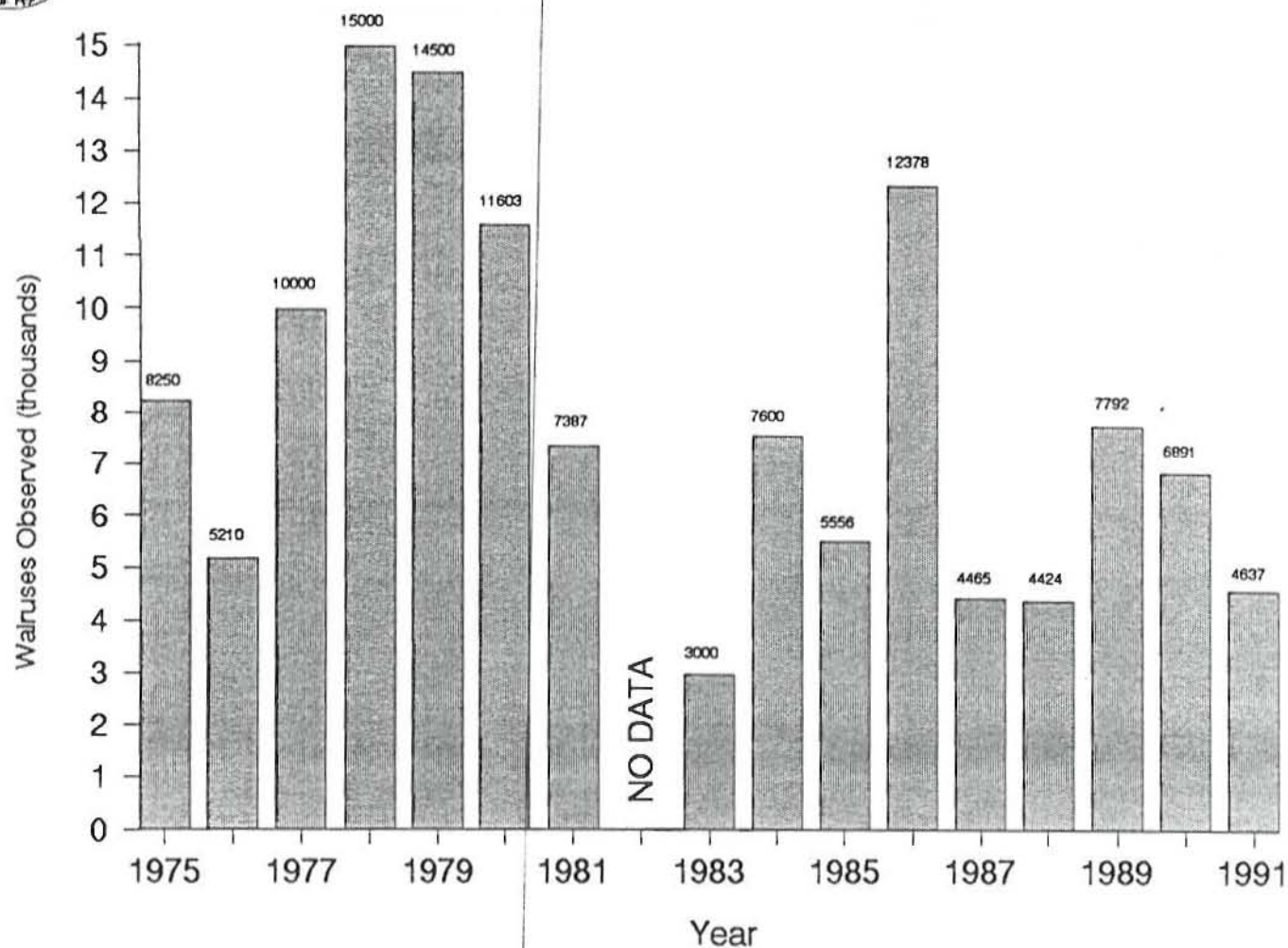


Figure 1. Peak counts of walrus observed on Round Island, Alaska, 1975-1991.