

TITLE: WALRUS ISLANDS STATE GAME SANCTUARY ANNUAL REPORT

REPORT PERIOD: 01 JANUARY - 31 AUGUST 1992

PROJECT LOCATION: GMU 17A (Northern Bristol Bay)

PROJECT GOALS:

A management plan is currently being drafted by the Department, but no formal management goals have been developed for the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary. In the interim, our management goals 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:

Two Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) technicians were stationed on Round Island from 30 April until 17 August 1992. As in past years, their primary duties consisted of patrolling the island for access violations in air or water, administering a visitor program, performing a wide range of maintenance duties and censusing walruses daily. In addition, they also monitored seabird productivity on 4 plots, ran a small mammal trapline, and censused sea lions at weekly intervals. Daily counts of boats on the northeast side of the island were also taken.

PROGRESS TOWARDS MEETING GOALS:

Enforcement

In June, the senior technician attended a fisheries and wildlife enforcement training session in Sitka. This is the first time in 5 years that there has been a person with enforcement capabilities stationed on Round Island. Perhaps because of the seizure of at least 8 yellowfin sole boats last year, little activity was seen involving trawl boats inside of the 12-mile limit. The North Pacific Fisheries Management Council indefinitely extended the 12-mile limit last year. It also formally specified a transit zone into Togiak Bay for federally permitted fishing vessels. Most of the yellowfin fleet had moved out of our visual range by late July.

There was an increase in the number of boats in Togiak Bay during the May herring season from 1991 (370 seine and gillnet boats) to 1992 (575 seine and gillnet boats). There was also an increase in the number of boats registered in Togiak Bay to fish for salmon, probably

because of poor salmon returns in the Nushagak River. Vessels passing the island on its northeast side usually appeared to be at a minimum distance of 4 miles.

The Dillingham area wildlife biologist consolidated past recommendations for airspace restrictions into a more consistent policy. This policy is currently being reviewed. During herring season we sighted 3 spotter planes "flightseeing" within 1/2 mile of the island; 1 of these planes was identified. The USCG was in the area flying surveillance of the yellowfin sole boats and many of these flights seemed to end with a fly-by of Round Island. There were at least 4 instances in which the US Coast Guard (USCG) C-130 aircraft flew within 3/4 mile of the island. Several of these close passes resulted in disturbances to seabirds and walruses.

Visitor Program

Changes in content and format in the visitor information packet resulted in visitors being better informed and much better prepared than in the past. The amount of visitor use was similar to last year's, with 196 visitors coming to the island (116 day and 80 overnight). Because the herring arrived later than expected on the herring grounds, we experienced a sharp increase in day visitors during May (1991 - 51 day visitors; 1992 - 111 day visitors). During FY92, \$6990 was collected in permit fees.

Two special groups had permits to visit the island this year. The first was a University of Alaska class from the Bristol Bay campus (Dillingham) which spent 6 days on the island. Staff on the island spent some extra time with this group, presenting seminars on walruses and wildflower identification. The second group was the Togiak high school journalism class. However, the class members cancelled at the last minute and only the chaperone and her son came to the island.

All of the Round Island day visitors arrived via fishing boat or tender. Staff heard some comments about the apparently discriminatory practices of allowing salmon or herring tenders to approach the island to visit but keeping (sometimes smaller) trawl boats at 12 miles or greater. Overnight visitors all arrived via Don Winkelman's charter service. Permit dates were changed this year to allow overlapping dates, i.e., visitors leaving on the last day of their permits would leave on the boat bringing visitors for the next permit period. For the first time, Winkelman made a strong effort to consolidate boat trips. This not only decreased the time of staff dedicated to conveying and orienting visitors, but it was an effort by ADFG and Winkelman to minimize traffic to and from the island. There were several permit periods during which Winkelman came every other day, which resulted in increased disturbances to wildlife on the island as well as intrusions into visitors' Round Island experiences.

Staff heard no complaints about visitor fees, which were in effect for the second year. However, many visitors using Winkelman's services had concerns about the safety of his operation and the amount he charged (\$300). Because the department distributes his brochure to

members of the public requesting information about Round Island, a tacit endorsement of Winkelman's services by ADFG is implied. Those who remarked on Winkelman's fee also noted that they would be more willing to pay the same amount if they knew that Round Island were to receive a portion of those monies.

Because of local political considerations which included strong sentiments about sovereignty and the proposed Round Island walrus hunt, Winkelman had his clients landed at the Twin Hills airport rather than Togiak Fisheries. Tensions increased throughout the season resulting in Winkelman cancelling his last trips to the island. This resulted in inconvenience and several misunderstandings. At the present time, the status of Winkelman's charter services for next season is unclear.

Wildlife

Land-based estimates of walrus numbers on the east side of the island were made daily. As last year, these estimates were made within 2 hours of the most convenient low tide. Seven total island counts were made throughout the season and generally there were few animals seen using the west side after early June. The peak walrus count was 4210 on 12 July. Sea lions were censused nearly daily through mid-July, and on a weekly basis after that date. The season's peak count of sea lions was 401 on 16 May. We observed no live sea lion pups, although we saw 1 pup carcass. As in other years, sea lions moved to the northeast ledges from Third Beach in June.

A total of 428.5 trap-hours were spent attempting to capture vole specimens for a graduate study of vole genetics at the University of Alaska/Fairbanks. No animals were caught, but 3 dead animals were collected and sent to Fairbanks at season's end.

Fox production was lower this year, with an estimated 10 to 15 adult animals on the island. Only 2 and possibly 3 dens had kits present, and no East Side dens were active. However, the presence of 2 yearlings and a third (unknown age) fox on the east side presented fox sighting opportunities for visitors.

Four seabird plots were monitored for productivity during the season. Data have not been analyzed, but production of kittiwakes and murre seemed higher than the last few years. There appeared to be more non-breeding cormorants in the area this year, and several nesting areas used in the past were not used this year. However, the single cormorant productivity plot that was monitored indicated that productivity values were similar to those seen in past years.

As in other years, marine mammal disturbances were logged. Visitors and staff witnessed several disturbances whose cause was not discernible. In general, walrus seemed more restless this year and staff observed seemingly more in-the-water interactions between walrus this season. Disturbances were indexed using the system described in 1989, where $\text{Index} = (\text{Level of disturbance}) \times (\text{Number of walrus disturbed})$. In 1991 we logged a total of 22 disturbances and

3 of these (14%) had an index ≥ 500 . During 1992, a total of 52 disturbances was logged. Eight of these (15%) had index values ≥ 500 . Three of these were from unknown causes, 3 were visitor-related, 1 was from burning garbage and 1 was from a USCG overflight. These data indicate that there is room for improvement in the Department's management of island access and permitted human activities.

Maintenance

Several changes or improvements were made to visitor facilities this season. A frame was constructed for an experimental tent platform and was partly filled with gravel. It appeared to work well and this campsite was in the best condition of any of the campsites at season's end. A second plywood-surfaced platform was constructed at season's end. With the small amount of remaining lumber, 50' of boardwalk was built to traverse the most boggy area above First Beach, where we routed a new trail last season. The boardwalk received positive reviews and was faster to build and more appropriate than rocks for the wet terrain.

~~Trail maintenance continued throughout the summer. Apart from~~ boardwalk and stones set near First Beach, no new trail was laid. Cutting grass, maintaining existing trails, and hauling gravel for the trail and the tent platform were other maintenance-related activities. The cabin and the campers' outhouse were painted with waterseal. A reusable system for attaching the cabin's shutters was installed, and the cabin's water faucet was replaced. The icehouse lid was fitted with splines to bypass the use of hinges which rarely last more than 2 seasons. A new hole for the cabin outhouse was dug, ready for next season.

The interior of the cabin's front room was sanded to remove accumulated mildew and painted with polyurethane varnish. The roof seams of the cabin were patched with tar. Of primary concern is the foundation of the cabin. Untreated wood and time are steadily taking their toll and there is definite structural degradation occurring. There is visible rot in the foundation and it is reasonable to assume that the aging plastic wrapped around the walls has allowed water access in some places.

Rather than expend a fair amount of time, effort and money within the next 1-2 years on replacing just the foundation, it might be more efficient over the long run to consider replacing the cabin entirely. Some of the materials, including cabinetry and windows, might be reusable. The existing cabin is well-maintained where it can be reached, but there are too many unknowns to put a lot of money and effort into salvaging just 1 part of it.

SEGMENT PERIOD PROJECT COSTS:

The original allocation for FY92 was \$37.3. Supplemental appropriations were provided by the Region to cover costs associated with increased personnel costs and with costs for sending the senior

technician to the fish and wildlife law enforcement training course in Sitka. The total allocation for FY92 was \$48.0.

Collection of permit fees resulted in increased administrative responsibilities for staff in Anchorage, Dillingham and on Round Island. Although almost \$7.0 was collected in FY92, none of these revenues were directly returned to the Round Island program.

Two ivory sales were conducted by the Eskimo Walrus Commission and ADFG during FY92, 1 in Anchorage in October and 1 in Dillingham in February. The total proceeds from these sales was \$2,345. The current balance of the walrus research fund (ivory sale money) is \$17.5. During FY92 we used \$459 from this fund to purchase binoculars for staff on the island.

The following project costs are for FY92 (1 JUL 91 - 30 JUN 92).

	<u>Personnel</u>	<u>Operating</u>	<u>Total</u>
Planned	26.3	21.7	48.0
Actual	37.4	6.9	44.3
Difference	-11.1	+14.8	+3.7

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary was originally protected as a walrus haulout and ADFG staff were stationed on the island for enforcement reasons. The Division needs to reaffirm and formalize our goals for the Sanctuary. Any planning should consider the sanctuary's integrity and put its intrinsic wildlife and scenic values before those of human use.

A minimum of 4 months of time for 2 staff on the island would maintain a presence from before herring season (May) to through silver season (August 30). It also takes a minimum of 1 week pre-season and 1 week post-season to purchase supplies, clean gear, write reports and so forth. At present, at least some of these duties are done voluntarily. With budget for Round Island continuing to decrease, some drastic changes may need to occur.

Enforcement:

1. Improve communication with USCG about effects of their overflights on Round Island wildlife.
2. Continue to station staff on island to make announcements and to document access violations.
3. Formalize the draft airspace policy and submit restrictions to the Federal Aviation Administration for inclusion on their aviation charts.

Visitors

1. Allow at least 1 week without visitors at either end of the season for staff to complete maintenance and reporting duties in a timely manner.
2. Consider setting a 32-foot limit on visitors' vessels; have open and closed days for day visitors. Establish consistent, defensible access policies for all visitors and forms of transport.
3. Have permit-fee waivers available on island for visitors who volunteer their assistance.

Wildlife

1. Continue current estimates of walrus numbers, attempting circumnavigations of island when possible.
2. Continue cooperating with USFWS with walrus and seabird data.
3. Further refine methods for collecting walrus disturbance information; compile observations from past years.
4. Consolidate sea lion data and report.
5. ~~Continue monitoring current productivity plots for black-legged kittiwakes and pelagic cormorants.~~
6. Establish thrice-weekly repeatable transect counts for alcids.

Maintenance

1. Plan to rebuild cabin within next 5 years. Evaluate needs of staff and potential future researchers.
2. Build tent platform and obtain a weatherport to use as for additional staff space and as an emergency shelter for visitors. An extra oil stove and pipe are already available on island.
3. Finish East Side trail.
4. Install new tub, modify existing tub platform and purchase new burner.

Budget:

1. Develop a cooperative agreement with USFWS in which they will provide supplemental funding and/or personnel for walrus and seabird research and management activities on Round Island.
2. Explore the possibility of using volunteers for trailwork and maintenance.
3. Consider charging charter services a fee for bringing visitors to the island.
4. Consider charging a "mooring fee" for day visitor vessels to encourage boat-pooling.
8. Research costs and logistics associated with building another cabin on Round Island: talk to pre-fab companies about getting a kit at cost; talk to local building supply about discount materials; talk to local fishermen's associations about transporting materials; talk to herring tenders from Seattle about buying materials there and bringing them up in the spring.

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Date: 1 November 1992
