

THE BERING SEA

25 YEARS: THE SAGA OF THE STELLER SEA LION

For at least three decades, the Steller sea lion of western Alaska has been disappearing at alarming rates. Controversies over its decline have fueled headlines for half that time.

In the early 1980s, the annual rate of decline averaged 5.9 percent. Scientists found evidence of low birth rates for sea lion females, indicating a shortage of food. From 1985 to 1989, the population dropped precipitously—losing about 15.6 percent each year. Since the early 1990s, the population has continued to decrease but at the more gradual rate of 5.2 percent annually.

So finally, some good news. NOAA Fisheries announced in September that since about 2000, the Steller's decline appears to have stabilized in some places in western Alaska, with some trend sites showing slight improvement and others showing a continued decline. Overall, the population has crept back up by about 2,000.

But this news is overshadowed by the fact that in the last 25 years, the western population has declined by just more than 81 percent, and is still down about 90,000 in population.

"It's still too early to say we hit bottom and are going back up again," says Lowell Fritz, director of the National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle.

The controversy still revolves around the sea lion's diet, and a major factor in its decline: Alaska groundfish fisheries, including pollock. The nation's largest fishery operates among the sea lions, and their main target is pollock.

The Steller seems to do well in areas without a large pollock fishery, such as in southeast Alaska, where the Steller population increased 44 percent from 1982 to 2002. In the Bering Sea, however, the commercial pollock industry blossomed at the same time the Steller plummeted.

The fishing industry claims that other forces, such as climate change, are forcing the Steller's population downward. Others, however, urge caution, given the unpredictable impacts of nature or global warming.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council and NOAA Fisheries seems willing to take that chance. Since 2000, they have allowed the amount of pollock caught within the Steller's "critical habitat" (see map at right) to grow fourfold—rising from 192,000 tons in 2000 to 738,000 tons in 2002.

The concern now, Fritz says, is that this bump up in the pollock catch could cause the sea lion to resume its downward trend.

Throughout the last 25 years, federal fishery authorities have repeatedly failed to exercise caution with the Steller's health, even to the point of ignoring their own scientists' advice:

1979 Count of adult Stellers on rookery and haulout trend site in western Alaska: 109,880. Population begins a steep slide as the pollock fishery climbs.

1989 Environmental organizations petition NOAA Fisheries to list all Steller sea lion populations in Alaska as endangered under the

Endangered Species Act.

1990 NOAA Fisheries lists the Steller as "threatened" (not endangered). Steller count: 30,525

NOAA Fisheries establishes 3-mile "no transit zones" around Steller sea lion rookeries. NOAA Fisheries finds that the Council's pollock fishery plan poses no jeopardy to the Steller.

1991 The Steller's western population drops below 30,000 for the first time.

1992 Areas around Steller sea lion rookeries are closed to trawling for its prey species. Most are closed within 10 nautical miles; others are closed within 20 nautical miles in winter, when the Steller's



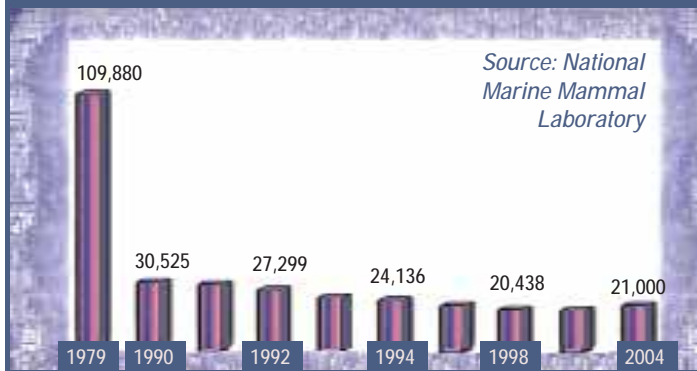
CAPE IZAGAN — Steller sea lions on Cape Izagan, on the southwest side of Unalaska Island, facing the North Pacific. Photo by Ward Testa, NMML

Where the Stellers roam



CRITICAL HABITAT — The yellow circles indicate 20-mile no-trawl zones around Steller sea lion rookeries in the Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea. The green polygon is a no-trawl zone known as the Steller Sea Lion Conservation Area, and the brown box is the Seguam Pass Foraging Area, another no-trawl zone. In 2001 NOAA Fisheries predicted the creation of these zones would push the pollock fishery away from sea lions and toward northern fur seal habitat. In fact, however, the fishery has expanded since then in both Steller sea lion habitat and within northern fur seal foraging areas as the total pollock harvest has increased.

Steller Sea Lion Counts, Western Alaska



Steller sea lion non-pup counts on rookery and haulout trend sites in western Alaska.

need for energy is greatest.

1993 NOAA Fisheries defines Steller sea lion Critical Habitat as waters within 20 nautical miles of 39 rookeries and 83 haulouts. The designation also includes protection for three foraging areas.

1995 NOAA Fisheries again finds the Council's pollock fishery poses no jeopardy to the Steller.

1996 The Bering Sea Ecosystem Report from the National Research Council recommends that to reverse declines, NOAA Fisheries should distribute fishing effort in time and place.

1997 NOAA Fisheries changes the status of the western Steller sea lion population. They are now listed as endangered.

1998 Greenpeace, American Oceans Campaign, and the Sierra Club sue NOAA Fisheries for failing to protect the sea lion.

NOAA Fisheries then issues its first Biological Opinion on the Atka mackerel and pollock fisheries. The agency says the pollock fisheries "jeopardize" the continued existence of Steller sea lions and adversely modify their critical habitat, but the Atka mackerel fisheries do not.

1999 NOAA Fisheries closes directed fishing for pollock in the Aleutian Islands and closes more areas to pollock trawling around additional rookeries and haulouts for spatial dispersion of fisheries.

2000 A federal court rules in favor of the conservation groups, banning pollock trawling within endangered Steller sea lion critical habitat until the Council and NOAA Fisheries revamp the pollock fishery. In November, NOAA Fisheries issues a new biological opinion that addresses the court's concerns. The injunction is lifted. Alaska Ted Stevens and President Clinton agree to a compromise that keeps the fishery open.

2001 The North Pacific Council appoints a committee dominated by industry to revise NOAA Fisheries' sea lion protection plan. The plan allows the pollock fishery to sharply increase within the Steller's critical habitat.

2002 Jim Balsinger, director of the NOAA Fisheries Alaska region, tells the U.S. Oceans Commission that the agency will never again "ignore" the Steller's problems. "With some 140 lawsuits against us now we've learned that it doesn't work not to follow the law."

2003 The conservation lawsuit ends. NOAA Fisheries agrees to produce an environmental impact statement on the Bering Sea fisheries.

2004 NOAA Fisheries issues the 7,000-page EIS. It calls for little change in the pollock fishery or sea lion protection measures, and for no further protection for the rapidly declining northern fur seal. The Steller population remains deeply depressed.