

FISH DECLINES PINNED ON PINNIPEDS

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For the first time since the 1972 enactment of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, thousands of marine mammals may be killed in U.S. waters. Plans recently announced by the U.S. Government, Washington State, and representatives of certain Washington Indian tribes reflect a nation- and world-wide movement towards culling marine mammals and signify an increasing threat to marine mammal populations worldwide.

Pinniped-Fisheries Interactions in Washington State

In January of 1995, The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) provisionally approved a request from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) for a permit to kill sea lions at Seattle's Ballard Locks. WDFW requested the permit from NMFS in a misguided effort to save a declining population of steelhead trout which travel through the Locks. If implemented, this action would result in the first government-sanctioned killing of marine mammals in U.S. waters since the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) was enacted in 1972.

The most notable condition of NMFS's approval was that efforts be made to live-capture predatory sea lions and hold them until the steelhead run ends for the season. However, NMFS and WDFW have stated that they do not intend to provide funds to maintain the sea lions in captivity for 1995-1996. So far, no sea lions have been killed, but government personnel could begin the lethal take at any time if captive holding is found infeasible because of the lack of funds.

NMFS authorized lethal removal despite a recommendation against it by almost half of the members of a government-appointed task force. These task force members argued that available data did not support WDFW's claims that sea lions are a primary or principal cause of the steelhead decline. They concluded instead that the steelhead decline was likely caused by the construction and operation of the locks, habitat degradation and manipulation, and poor fisheries management. Sea lion predation, the group found, was only a symptom of the problem. The group also concluded that there was no evidence that removing sea lions would result in an increase of steelhead. Further, evidence from previous relocation efforts suggested that removed sea lions would be replaced by others. Finally, the group determined that all practical and non-lethal options had not been reasonably attempted as required in the MMPA.

Despite the data, the agencies still remain insistent on removing sea lions with no apparent regard for the myriad other factors affecting this fishery. Last season, only 137 steelhead were estimated to have returned to the Ballard Locks. If a fraction of the time and money spent on arguing the merits of killing predatory sea lions had been invested in developing and implementing viable short- and long-term solutions (such as modifications to the Locks, a naturalistic fish refuge, and other habitat improvements), this steelhead population might already be out of danger and on the road to recovery.

Seals and sea lions are also being blamed by members of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission for the decline of tribal fisheries. In response, the commission recently announced that several tribal fisheries plan to begin harvest of hundreds or thousands of seals and sea lions in Washington State waters as soon as a commercial market is found. Apparently, the Makah tribe also intends to begin harvest of sea otters, an action that may be linked to impacts on sea urchin fisheries. The Muckleshoot tribe has announced plans to kill up to 75 pinnipeds near Seattle in 1996. These proposed actions appear to extend well beyond traditional subsistence hunting rights and represent a notable departure from traditional hunting practices of these American Indian tribes.

"Scapegoating" of Pinnipeds Spreads

In April of 1995, the California Fish and Game Commission requested assistance from NMFS in resolving "the perceived negative impact California sea lions are having on fish stocks in California." On the other side of the continent, in Maine, a Pinniped-Aquaculture Task Force has been formed to discuss seal predation of salmon grown in pens near seal haul out sites. According to Sharon Young, an HSUS consultant to the task force, fish farmers claimed great losses due to seal predation, but would not provide the task force with figures to substantiate the losses. In the absence of data implicating pinnipeds in the decline of fish populations, either wild or farmed, no lethal take of pinnipeds is planned so far in either California or Maine. However, danger to seals and sea lions will likely grow as commercially available fish stocks continue to decline in these regions.

Unfortunately, perceived conflicts between seals and sea lions and declining fisheries are not confined to the United States. The ministers of fisheries for Canada, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway, and Russia, and the representative of Greenland, in a joint statement (October 19, 1995), stated that the sizes of seal herds need to be reduced to assure sufficient food for the world's human population. They also agreed on the need for a joint public information campaign to spread this message, yet they did not provide data to substantiate it.

Canada has driven its northern cod fishery to commercial extinction through overfishing. However, Canadian Fisheries Minister Brian Tobin has singled out seal predation as the cause of the failure of the fishery to recover, despite a conspicuous lack of scientific data to support his statement. The Canadian government has expanded its east coast seal hunt by declaring a bounty on seals and has opened a recreational seal hunt with a quota of over 200,000 harp, hooded, and gray seals. The government is subsidizing the hunt because of a lack of commercial markets, with the exception being the sex organs of the seals, used in the Asian aphrodisiac trade. Norway also recently resumed hunting of weaned seal pups for the first time in approximately six years, announcing a hunting quota of 20,625 adult seals for 1995.

Science Ignored

The role of science in marine mammal-fisheries management has been diminished and overshadowed by political agenda and uninformed, simplistic reactions to declining fisheries. As stated by W. Nigel Bonner, in the *Natural History of Seals* (1990; pg. 130), It is exceedingly difficult to find convincing examples that fish-eating marine mammals have affected the

abundance of a fish stock (IUCN 1981)...The seemingly self-evident proposition that more seals mean fewer fish is not actually soundly based...In an undisturbed ecosystem, seals and their prey will have evolved together to form a complicated web of feeding relationships. Seals that feed on fish usually take a variety, some of which may themselves be fish predators. If one species becomes scarce, the seals may switch to another, allowing a recovery of the depleted species. Such relationships will have been built up over thousands of generations and are not easily susceptible to the simple modeling that is implied by the fisherman's argument.

Due largely to human overexploitation and habitat degradation, fish stocks are decreasing worldwide at alarming rates. Consequently, marine mammals will be increasingly vulnerable to misplaced human reaction as well as to decreased food sources. The killing of marine mammals in Washington State or elsewhere in the U.S. will be precedent-setting and have global implications. A comprehensive, science-based, public education campaign is needed to compensate for the sensationalized media portrayal of marine mammals as fish-gorging predators in perpetual conflict with fish stocks. A more realistic portrayal of the sensitive and intricate balance which has existed between these animals and their prey for thousands of years may serve not only to inform, but to serve as an example to fisheries managers as well.

For more information, see:

"Report and Recommendations of the Ballard Locks Pinniped-Fisheries Interaction Task Force," 1994 and 1995, available from Joe Scordino, NMFS, 7600 Sand Point Way, N.E., Seattle, WA 98115. Phone: (206) 526-6143.

Letters regarding fisheries-pinniped interactions in the U.S. can be written to: Penelope Dalton, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service, 1335 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. FAX: (301) 713-2258.

Letters regarding the Canadian seal hunt can be written to: Hon. Brian Tobin, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, 200 Kent St., Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0E6, Canada

Letters regarding whaling in U.S. waters can be written to: Dr. James Baker, NOAA, HDQ, 14th and Constitution Ave., NW, Room 5128, Washington DC, 20230; FAX: (202) 408-9674; phone: (202) 482-3436.