

Marine Mammal Management

by Suzanne Iudicello and Sheila Polson

The state is seeking to regain control of ten marine mammals. How will it proceed?

Alaska's waters are known for their abundance of fish and shellfish, but they are also home to a fascinating group of animals that are not only valuable to Alaskans, but of interest to people all over the world—marine mammals. Marine mammals include nearly three dozen species that live in or pass through Alaskan waters. Great whales, toothed whales, seals, dolphins, and porpoises are all marine mammals.

The state is trying to regain from the federal government the authority to manage 10 of these marine mammal species. The 10 are polar bear, walrus, belukha whale, sea lion, sea otter, and ringed, ribbon, spotted, harbor and bearded seals.

At meetings all over the state, Alaskans have been discussing the pros and cons, the benefits and costs, of having management of these marine mammals vested with the state. These discussions may culminate in a decision this summer to apply to the federal government for return of management.

Alaskans had authority over these species from statehood in 1959, when the newly-established Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) began studying and developing management programs for these animals, until 1972. Before that, little was known about the use, life history, or ecological importance of marine mammals. Between 1959 and 1972, ADF&G biologists worked to establish marine viewing areas, sanctuaries, and refuges, and conducted research programs. The board of fisheries and game passed regulations governing hunting seasons, bag limits, and humane methods of harvest.

Then in 1972, Congress passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), and the federal government assumed management authority over marine mammals. One of the goals of the act was to maintain the health and stability of populations of animals and fish that depend on each other and the ocean environment they inhabit. The act included provisions through which individual states could regain management of the marine mammals that live off their coasts. Since 1973, Alaska has been working to regain this authority over 10 species that are of particular significance to its people.

These 10 species, which represent about a third of the marine mammals that inhabit Alaskan waters, always have been important to people of arctic and subarctic regions, where diverse cultures and technologies were founded on marine mammals. Today, Alaskans in the northern coastal regions of the state still depend on marine mammals for food, skins, and for materials for Native handicrafts.

Historically, the abundance of marine mammals here was a



major reason for the exploration, exploitation, and occupation of the region by Europeans in the 1700s. Attracted by the furs of sea otters and fur seals, Russian hunters exploited this resource so intensively that by 1900 the sea otters were almost wiped out. The valuable oil and baleen of whales attracted yet another hunter, the Yankee whalers, in the mid 19th century.

Today, management of marine mammals is important not only because of their direct use by northern peoples, but because they also are affected by Alaskans through activities such as commercial fishing, ocean drilling and mining, and development in the coastal zone.

In the hope of resuming full-scale marine mammal research and management programs, ADF&G maintained a marine mammal staff even after the passage of the MMPA. Currently, ADF&G staff are conducting studies of the food habits of seals, walruses, and belukha whales and how they interact with other species; the natural history of harbor seals and seal lions; the winter habits of ringed seals and the effects of seismic exploration on them, and the migrations of belukha whales. These programs, along with maintenance of the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary, and recent amendments to the MMPA, make now the right time to apply for return of management, ADF&G officials believe.

Since the MMPA was passed, federal agencies have not developed management programs for most of these 10 species, although two species that are of great importance to Alaskans are subjects of federal and international programs and treaties—the fur seal and bowhead whale. Other species, such as the beaked whales, most large whales, and porpoises, reside on the high seas and are not affected significantly by Alaskans.

The state is seeking return of management for several reasons. It would provide an active, more local role in the management of a group of animals of great importance for subsistence, economic, and aesthetic reasons. The state would be in a stronger negotiating position when dealing with coastal zone management issues affecting Alaskans. State management would provide the opportunity to protect and conserve these resources, and at the same time allow maximum economic return from marine mammals to coastal rural residents. Marine

mammal management is seen as a potential avenue for resolving mammal and fisheries conflicts, enabling the department to view fish, shellfish, and marine mammals as an entire ecosystem, rather than trying to manage each species separately.

States seeking management authority must transfer requests to the Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Following this, a many-tiered process is set in motion. It may be a year before final management authority is regained.

One of the next steps in the process is a scientific hearing to determine the biological status and optimum population ranges for the 10 species. This hearing, called the "OSP" or optimum sustainable population hearing, establishes a population level or range used as a basis for managing a particular species. It gives guidelines for population size and levels of mortality. This range is determined through a scientific hearing process that looks at current population size, relationship of the number of animals to the carrying capacity of their habitat (or, how many individuals their environment can support), and the maximum mortality that may be allowed through all kinds of human activities including accidental catches in fisheries.

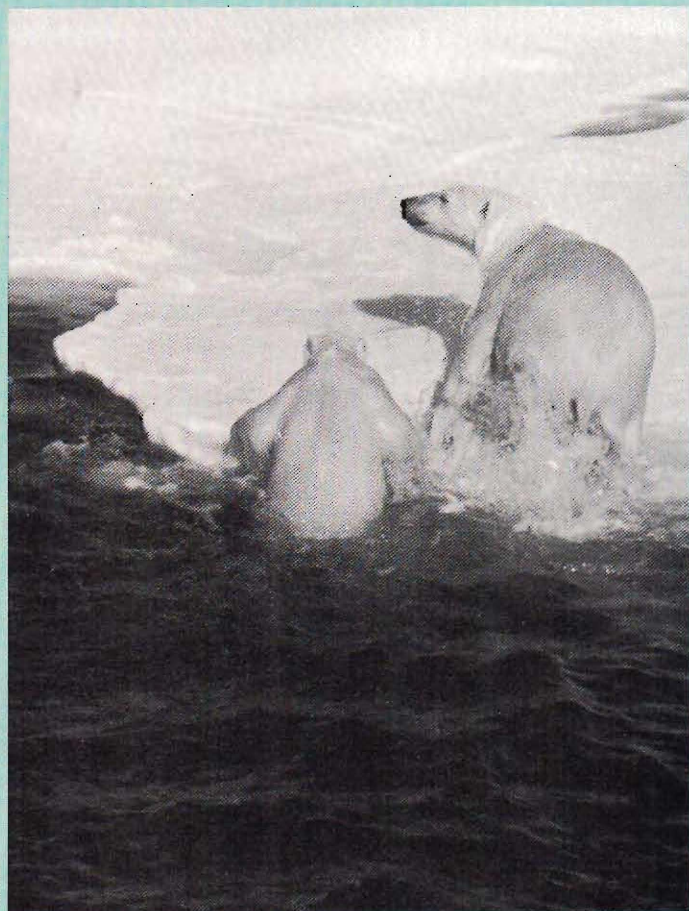
Another stage of the process is the passage of laws by the State Legislature, and passage of "framework" regulations by the Board of Game. The legislature needs to consider not only statutes regarding waste and humane harvests of marine mammals, but also funding for the program. The board first will consider framework regulations, or generic regulations that set up the process for resuming management of marine mammals.

In a second round, the board will have to pass the actual regulations on harvest, bag limits, methods and means. Another state board, the Guide Licensing and Control Board, will have to regulate who may conduct guided hunts for marine mammals.

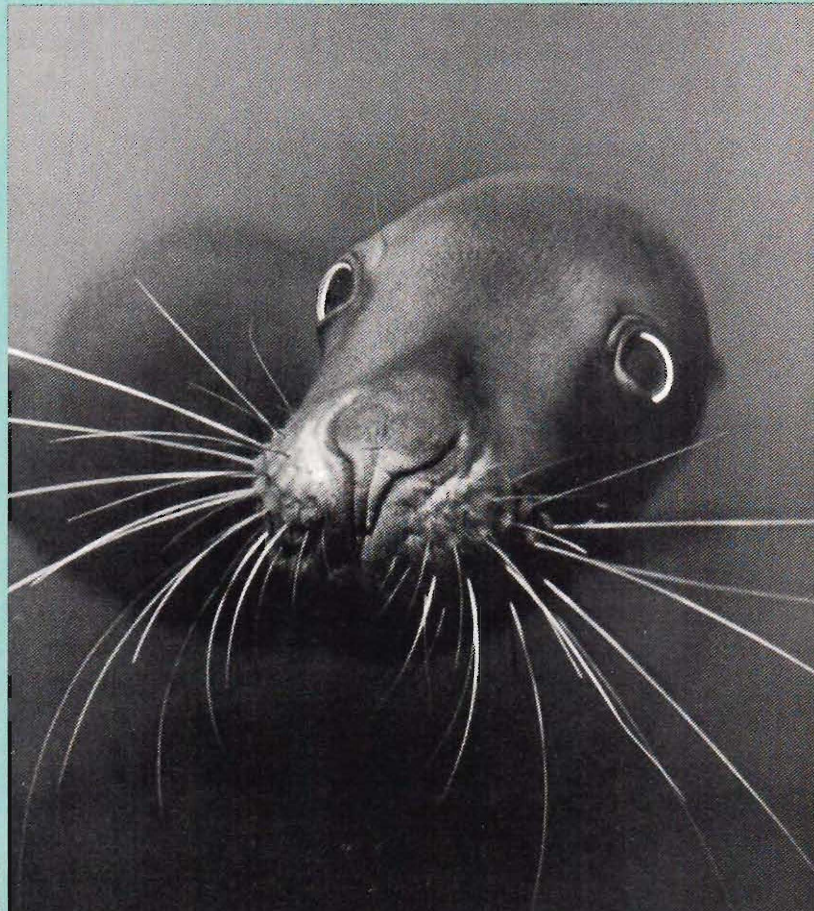
Throughout this process, ample opportunity exists for interested citizens to express their views. At the first stage, the OSP hearing, persons who have scientific information on any of the 10 species may testify. Before the boards take up their regulatory process, hearings will be held throughout the state, including coastal villages, for the purpose of obtaining public comment on what kind of state management program people would like to see. Later, during the regulatory process of the boards, interested citizens may propose regulations, or testify. After the federal agencies review the transfer document Alaska submits, a copy of the state's application will be published in the federal register, and people can comment at that time, too.

As rich in game as Alaska's vast upland acres are, its coastline—longer than the rest of the U.S. coast—is even richer because of the marine mammals that live there. Many recognize that the State of Alaska is in the best position to manage certain of its marine mammals to achieve maximum benefits to those animals, to the Alaskans using them, and to other marine animals with which the mammals interact. ■

Suzanne Iudicello recently resigned as chief of ADF&G's Public Communications Section to sail around the world. Sheila Polson is ADF&G's Fairbanks information officer.



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