Consortium organizes to study seal impacts

WOODS HOLE, MA – Responding to an increased sense of urgency to learn as much as possible about the impacts of the gray seal population explosion off New England, scientists and fishermen have come together to form the Northwest Atlantic Seal Research Consortium.

The mission of the consortium in part is to coordinate research to document, understand, and find ways to reduce interactions between fishermen and seals. The idea came out of a series of meetings held in recent years among scientists, commercial and recreational fishermen, and resource managers (see CFN September 2012).

"We want to pool our resources and better identify priorities about what work needs to be done," explained Owen Nichols, director of the Marine Fisheries Research Program at the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (PCCS) and a consortium steering committee member.

Consortium members already are networking all of the time, he added, and have made a commitment to meet at least once every two years to exchange information more formally.

"There is a wide array of research projects that are in various stages of completion, from project development and pilot studies to full-scale efforts focused on seal interactions with fisheries, prey consumption estimates, tagging, abundance surveys, disease, and lots more," Nichols said.

Other consortium steering committee members include: Andrea Bogomolni, a research associate at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI); Keith Matassa, coordinator of the University of New England Marine Animal Rehabilitation Center in Biddeford, ME; Greg Early, an independent researcher who has worked on the subject of pinniped interactions on both the East and West Coasts; Lisa Sette, a member of the PCCS's Marine Mammal Entanglement Response team who also studies gray seal habits; Stephanie Wood, a contract biologist for the Northeast Fisheries Science Center who has a background in seal tagging; and Rob DiGiovanni, director and senior biologist of the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation based in Riverhead, NY.

"This encompasses all issues – how they live, where they go, what they eat, their health and illnesses and interactions with the world – including with us," said Bogomolni.

Owen Nichols/PCCS photo

Different stakeholders may have differing points of view on seal-related issues, but, so far, consortium participants have built solid relationships, she said.

Limited funding is a challenge for everyone studying seal issues, which is another underlying reason for creating the consortium.

"We hope that collaboration through a consortium will help us overcome that," said Nichols. "By working together, resources from several smaller efforts can be pooled to address larger questions, and duplicative efforts can be avoided."

CCCHFA fund

The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association (CCHFA) raised more than $70,000 for its "Fishermen's Fund" during last summer's "Hookers Ball." The fund is meant to give local fishermen the resources they need to develop creative solutions to environmental problems and secure their businesses.

The first initiative undertaken by the fund is to learn more about the gray seals that congregate by the thousands on Outer Cape beaches and swim within Chatham Harbor among commercial boats offloading their catches.

CCCHFA recently hired biologist Betty Lentell, who previously worked with the National Marine Fisheries Service and is a guest investigator with WHOI, to work with the consortium on the association's behalf.

According to CCCHFA, Lentell is involved in a number of consortium projects, including: conducting a seal population assessment; tracking water quality at and around seal haul-out sites to assess ecosystem impacts; studying disease transmission issues; and reviewing depredation rates to get a better sense of how seal predation affects stocks important to fishermen.

Projects

One of the consortium's collaborative projects involves examining data collected from 2003 through 2012 by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to investigate the effect of seal populations on water quality at beaches along Outer Cape Cod, including those in Truro, Wellfleet, and Chatham.

In mid-December, WHOI announced that the analysis found no evidence that water quality at beaches near large seal haul-out sites was any worse than at beaches without large numbers of seals nearby.

However, the consortium researchers involved in the project will continue to assess and monitor the effects of seal populations on the ecology and economy of the region, WHOI said.

More information about this study and the consortium itself is posted on the Northwest Atlantic Seal Research Consortium website at <www.whoi.edu/page.do?pid=116616>.

The website also hosts a page under a tab labeled "Citizen Science" that links visitors to WHOI's Marine Animal Identification Network. People who see a seal with a tag or brand, which is how Canadian researchers mark seals for study, or witness an unusual behavior are encouraged to report their observations on the site.