

SEA OTTER MANAGEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA



Community Economic
Development Strategy

CEDS



2011 Five Year CEDS Regional Project - Action Initiative

Title or Name of the Strategy:

Sea Otter Management in Southeast Alaska.

Motivation:

In 1965, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) reintroduced 412 sea otters into Southeast Alaska: populations remained low until 1987 when a period of rapid growth with annual rates of increase documented between 15.7% and 23.3% (pg. 16 Pritchett). Recent surveys conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) now indicated that the sea otter population in Southeast Alaska is approximately 20,000 animals and growing. Sea otters are efficient predators, eating almost any invertebrate they can find and catch. They must be efficient, for they need to eat the equivalent of almost 26% of their body weight every day. Sea otters can grow larger than four feet and weigh up to 90 pounds. In areas with rocky bottoms the preferred species are sea urchins, sea cucumbers and abalone. In areas with softer bottoms they eat geoduck clams and crabs. All of these species are vitally important to subsistence, personal use, and commercial harvesters in coastal Southeast Alaska.

One of the first of the shellfish species to fall prey to the sea otter's appetite was the abalone fishery on the outer coast of Southeast Alaska. It is now obvious that sea urchins, geoduck clams, sea cucumbers, and crab are being impacted. Shrimp are also impacted to an unknown degree.

SARDFA along with other organizations in Southeast Alaska such as the Southeast Conference, Petersburg Vessels Owners Association, Southeast Alaska Fishermen's Alliance, United Fishermen of Alaska, and various native organizations and tribes are coming together to begin a sea otter management plan in Southeast Alaska. By working with the state and federal government, all of the organizations can develop a realistic plan which will help protect the subsistence, personal use, and commercial fisheries of the people that depend on shellfish in Southeast Alaska.

Objective:

Southeast organizations have begun to form a Task Force composed of USFWS members, ADF&G members, commercial fishing organizations, and Southeast Alaska native tribes and organizations to look at realistic management approaches to protect important shellfish species and to allow a less restrictive harvest of sea otters by Alaskan natives. Southeast organizations are requesting the Federal and State agencies examine the impact of sea otters on the subsistence, personal use, and commercial harvest of sea cucumber, sea urchin, geoduck clam, and crab with the ultimate goal of an ecosystem-based sea otter management plan benefiting all users of shellfish resources protecting shellfish resources from depletion,



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and allowing effective subsistence harvest of sea otters by the Alaska Native people. Currently there are many groups interested in researching the depletion of resources by sea otters and returning the rights of Native Alaskans to sell intact sea otter pelts but there to date has not been the coordination necessary to prevent the duplication of efforts or exchange of ideas, solutions and information. ***The development of a task force would form a core group to coordinate efforts and provide for an exchange of information and consolidate efforts so that we work together on common initiatives.***

Obstacles:

Sea otters are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Alaska Natives under the MMPA are denied the customary and traditional ability to sell intact sea otter pelts. By working with the Federal Government to allow the Alaska Native people the right to make further use of subsistence sea otter catches or work with the Congressional delegation to amend the MMPA to allow the sale of intact sea otter pelts, we can work towards more effective harvest. Development of an effective management plan will come by working with Federal agencies and the Task Force.

Outcomes/ Results:

1. The first objective is to develop a SE Otter Task Force. Development of the task force with designated members would be the first measurement.
2. The second objective is to develop an effective management plan for increased subsistence take of sea otters by the Alaska Native people.
3. The third objective is to allow the Alaska Native people the right to make further use of subsistence sea otter catches. Allowing the sale of intact sea otter pelts will be the second measurement.

Leadership:

SARDFA (Executive Director – Phil Doherty) has played a lead role in attempting to establish a SE AK Sea Otter Task Force. Several other organizations are also involved including Petersburg Vessels Owners Association, Southeast Alaska Fishermen’s Alliance, the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida, and several towns and communities of SE AK.

Description:

1. Develop a working Task Force to develop a management plan for SE AK.



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2. Support clarifying the definition or changing regulation to allow the Alaska Native people the traditional right to make further use of subsistence sea otter catches
3. Develop an effective sea otter management plan to allow increased subsistence take of sea otters by the Alaska Native people.
4. Support continued University of Alaska and USFWS research on SE AK sea otters.
Timeline: Spring of 2011

Funding:

Cost would be minimal; perhaps some travel money within the region and meeting room rental. Costs would be borne by individual groups or municipalities to start with. Costs would increase due to necessary trips to Washington DC, or the use of a lobbyist to support legislation.