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Conservation Groups Oppose Eco-Labeling for Alaska Pollock

What Karin Holser misses most are the baby seals. A highlight of her summers in the Pribilof Islands was paddling her kayak among the wide-eyed fur seal pups that crowded the shores.

“I could pet them, right next to my boat,” she recalled. “They’d be all over – a hundred of them.” The seal pups began disappearing in 1995, she said. Today, she said, “they’re just not there.”

Neither are the sea lions, the sea otters, the crabs and the seabirds, not in anything like their historical numbers along coastal Alaska. What all of these species have in common is their dependence on the same food, pollock, which also happens to be the biggest commercial fishery in the United States.

A lawsuit filed in response to the crashing sea lion population has resulted in a federal court declaring the pollock fishery in violation of both the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. So why, Holser wants to know, is a major international conservation group now thinking about giving the pollock trawlers an environmental seal of approval?

The Marine Stewardship Council, formed in 1997 as a joint program of the Unilever food company and the World Wildlife Fund, has been asked by the fishing industry to certify pollock as a sustainable fishery, a recognition that would allow pollock to be marketed as an environmentally responsible consumer choice. According the council's website, "Consumers know that by buying seafood with the MSC label, they are supporting healthier oceans and a healthier environment."

Holser flew to a recent hearing in Anchorage to tell MSC consultants that the ocean surrounding the Pribilofs is far from healthy.

"There's a train wreck happening," she said. "You're dealing with sea lions now, but the fur seals are next. There's whole age groups missing out there."

Pup seal counts in the Pribilofs have fallen from 500,000 in the early 1950s to 180,000 in 2000.

Holser, a representative of St. George Tribal Council, St. Paul Tribal Government and the Pribilof Islands Stewardship Program, was joined at the May 3 hearing by environmental groups from across Alaska. They urged the MSC to deny certifying the pollock fishery as sustainable because of its apparent impact on other marine life that depends on pollock for food.

"You can't prove any kind of cause and effect, but it argues for a lot more caution," said Linda Behnken of Sitka, director of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association and a nine-year veteran of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

While the legal battle over pollock has focused on sea lions, there are an additional two-dozen species of mammals, fish and seabirds in the North Pacific that are currently listed as threatened or endangered. Meanwhile, several pollock fishing areas have been closed due to overfishing, and the supposedly "healthy" stock in the eastern Bering Sea is estimated at only 45 percent of its original population.

“Sea lions were the canary in the coal mine,” said Janis Searles, a lawyer in Juneau for Earthjustice, a legal group representing the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against NMFS. “They are the species that’s declined by 90 percent.”

Despite the precipitous declines in marine mammal populations, it has been more than 20 years since the National Marine Fisheries Service has studied the environmental impact of the pollock catch, estimated at 2.6 billion pounds a year.

Once scorned as a trash fish, pollock has taken the place of the North Atlantic’s depleted cod stocks as a principal ingredient in frozen fish sticks, imitation crabmeat and fast-food fish sandwiches.

“It’s the largest fishery in the world in terms of volume, and yet we have very little knowledge of its ecosystem effect,” Behnken said. “I have very grave concerns about the longterm impact of this fishery.”

Larry Merculieff, director of Public Policy and Advocacy for the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, said local Natives began noticing disturbing sights in the late 1970s: Birds with their chests caved in and their breastbones sticking out. Chicks falling off their nesting cliffs. Seal pelts so thin that light could be seen through them.

Since then, he said, there have been 60- to 80-percent declines in the populations of not only seals and sea lions but otters, crab, puffins, murres, kittiwakes and more.

“This is not the canary in the mine,” he said, “but the last sign of collapse of an entire ecosystem.”

“I was born and raised in the Pribilofs,” he continued. “We call it the Galapagos of the North. The sad fact is, our information is considered anecdotal, interesting pieces of information that may or may not be useful. My people have been out here for 10,000 years continuously. We know more about that ecosystem than anybody."

"What's at stake here is not only our cultures, not only our way of life, but the very basis of sustaining our peoples. The Yupik, Inupiaq and Aleut peoples depend heavily on wild foods out there."

In response to the sea lion lawsuit, a federal judge has ordered NMFS to prepare a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement evaluating the pollock fishery's impact on marine mammals and other dependent species.

Jack Sterne, an attorney with Trustees for Alaska, compared the sea lion issue to the spotted owl controversy that shut down logging across much of the Pacific Northwest. He said that until NMFS produces its supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, which isn't expected until 2004, the pollock fishery is in violation of federal law.

"Once the court made that declaration, proceeding with the fisheries became illegal," he said. The plaintiffs have "chosen to forestall" seeking an injunction to stop pollock trawling outright, he said, but "If we decided to, we could do it tomorrow."

"It's hard to justify certifying a fishery that has that kind of legal problem hanging over its head," Sterne said.

Tony Smith, a member of the MSC evaluation team, responded that "there's not a fishery in the world that's under compliance with the equivalent of what's really required."

According to the MSC's principles, the criteria for sustainability include the health of the entire marine ecosystem, including other dependent species. However, Smith said, "It is not our job to do an environmental impact analysis."

To date the MSC has certified six fisheries including one in the United States, Alaska salmon. Critics of the certification process point that the MSC receives funds from the fishing industry, and has so far approved all of the fisheries proposed for certification. Headquartered in London, the MSC has been an independent nonprofit since 1999. Its environmental supporters include the World Wildlife Fund, National Audubon Society and Natural Resources Defense Council. Its biggest industry partner is Unilever, which currently buys 25 percent of the world's supply of white fish.

The MSC's evaluation of the pollock fishery is being conducted by Scientific Certification Systems Inc. of Oakland, Calif., an independent consulting company. Chet Chaffee, director of SCS's marine conservation program, said the company is well aware of the environmental problems along coastal Alaska and the controversial history of the pollock fishery.

"We've made an incredible effort on this one to slow the process down and incorporate many people's views," he said. "We're not brushing this off."

Chaffee said he expects the company's draft recommendation to be completed and available for public comment by August.