Ice Seals: Frequently Asked Questions

1) What are ice seals and why are they called that?
   • In Alaska, “ice seals” is a general term often used to refer to ringed, bearded, ribbon, and spotted seals.
   • These species are called ice seals because they give birth to their pups on the sea ice and they rely on sea ice for nursing, rearing, molting, feeding and resting during some part of the year. Each ice seal species is uniquely adapted to use specific types of sea ice in different ways.

2) What is the National Marine Fisheries Service?
   NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is the federal government agency responsible for research, management, and conservation of whales, seals, and sea lions. Our Alaska regional offices are located in Juneau and Anchorage, and our marine mammal laboratory is in Seattle, Washington.

3) What is the Ice Seal Committee and how do they co-manage ice seals?
   The Ice Seal Committee (ISC) is an Alaska Native organization dedicated to conserving ice seal populations, habitat, and hunting, and to preserving Native cultures and traditions. The ISC co-manages ice seals with NMFS by monitoring subsistence harvest and cooperating on needed research and education programs pertaining to ice seals.

4) Have ice seals been listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)?
   Under the ESA, an endangered species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range, while a threatened species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. The following recent ESA listing decisions have been published for ice seals:
   • **Ringed and Bearded Seals**: In December 2012, NMFS listed three subspecies of ringed seals and two distinct population segments (DPSs) of bearded seals, including those that occur in Alaska, as threatened under the ESA. Ladoga ringed seals, which occur in Lake Ladoga, Russia, were listed as endangered. Although ringed and bearded seals are currently numerous in Alaska, NMFS concluded that long-term changes in sea ice habitat pose significant long-term threats to the persistence of these seals in the foreseeable future. In July 2014, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska issued a memorandum decision vacating the listing of bearded seals in Alaska. The Department of Justice, on behalf of NMFS, has filed a notice of appeal of this court decision.
   • **Spotted Seals**: In October 2009, NMFS determined that listing under the ESA was not warranted for the Okhotsk and Bering DPSs of spotted seals, including those in Alaska. NMFS listed the southern DPS of spotted seals (Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan) as threatened under the ESA in October 2010.
   • **Ribbon Seals**: In July 2013, NMFS determined that listing under the ESA was not warranted. Ribbon seals remain on NMFS’s Species of Concern list. These are species for which NMFS has concerns regarding status and threats, but for which insufficient information is available to indicate a need to list the species under the ESA.

5) What is critical habitat, and has it been designated for ice seals in Alaska?
   • Under the ESA, critical habitat is defined as the geographic area(s) that contain habitat features essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations or protection.
   • A critical habitat designation does not set up a refuge or sanctuary for the species, and has no regulatory impact on activities that do not require a permit, funding, or other action from a federal agency. Federal agencies are required to ensure that their activities do not destroy or adversely modify critical habitat. Such activities include actions authorized, funded, or undertaken by a federal agency.
   • In December 2014, NMFS announced a proposal to designate critical habitat for ringed seals in the northern Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas where sea ice conditions essential for pupping, nursing, basking, and molting occur. Primary prey resources to support ringed seals also occur within the proposed critical habitat. NMFS will consider comments received during the public comment period on the proposal as it develops a final critical habitat designation. The critical habitat proposal, supporting documents, and details regarding how to submit comments can be found at the website listed below.
   • The designation of critical habitat for ringed seals will not affect the provisions of the ESA that allow for subsistence harvest of the species by Alaska Natives.

6) Are Alaska Natives still able to hunt ringed seals for subsistence purposes now that they are listed as threatened under the ESA?
   • Yes. The ESA allows for subsistence harvest of listed species by Alaska Natives, so long as it is not done in a wasteful manner.
   • NMFS does not anticipate that the listing will lead to any regulation of subsistence hunting. Currently, the subsistence harvest of ice seals by Alaska Natives appears to be sustainable and does not pose a threat to the populations.
   • Subsistence hunting may be regulated under the ESA, but only if the harvest is expressly found to “materially and negatively” affect the species. NMFS would have to provide notice and hold an administrative hearing on the record for any such regulations.

7) We have limits on many subsistence resources but not ice seals. Will this change?
   If ice seal populations decline to very low levels over time, limits could be put on subsistence harvest of them. NMFS would work under the co-management agreement with the ISC to find the best approach to maintaining sustainable harvests of ice seals by Alaska Natives.

8) If restrictions were placed on hunting ringed or bearded seals, would other activities that may affect them, such as commercial fishing, be restricted?
   NMFS must consider many activities that may affect listed species, including fishing, offshore oil and gas activities, and subsistence harvest. Any such activities could be restricted if they pose serious threats to the persistence of ringed and bearded seals, and solving any conservation challenges will be informed by the best data available.

9) Who can I contact for more information?
   • The NMFS Alaska Region Web Site at: [http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice.htm](http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice.htm)
   • Barbara Mahoney (biologist) - National Marine Fisheries Service (Anchorage): (907) 271-3448
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