



Steller Sea Lions -- ENDANGERED!

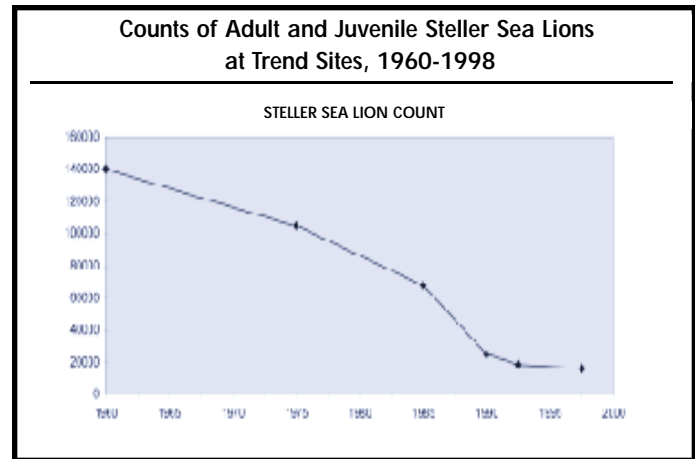
As large as a Volkswagen Beetle, the Steller sea lion is the biggest sea lion in the world. Ten feet long and weighing in at up to a ton, Steller sea lions need an enormous amount of food to survive. So they are "opportunistic feeders," meaning they'll eat anything that's around. Pacific cod, flatfish, rockfish, salmon, herring, octopus, and squid, and most importantly pollock and Atka mackerel are all a part of the Steller sea lion's diet.

All of these species are targeted or caught incidentally in the federally-managed North Pacific groundfish fisheries. But as fishing becomes concentrated in their feeding areas the Steller sea lion is fast disappearing.

As recently as 1960, western Alaska was home to more than 175,000 adult Steller sea lions. Since that time, however, the Steller sea lion population has declined by over 80%. Following a petition filed by 18 environmental organizations, The Steller sea lion was listed as a threatened species throughout its range in 1990. But the Steller sea lion continued to decline throughout western Alaska. When NMFS reclassified the western population of North Pacific Stellers as endangered in 1997, scientists predicted that the once plentiful species would be extinct within the next century if the trends continued.

Today, the North Pacific population of Steller sea lions is at but a fraction of its former size. A staggering 90% of adult sea lions from Kenai to Kiska have disappeared (a decline from 140,000 in 1960 to 16,259 in 1998). With the total North Pacific population at approximately 22,000, continued estimated annual declines of 5.4% each year do not bode well for its future.

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Weighing more than a ton, male Steller sea lions are the largest sea lions in the world, and one of the most endangered.

With the rise of industrial trawl fishing in the North Pacific, Steller sea lions were caught in fishing nets as they tried to catch the same fish humans targeted. Trawl nets killed an estimated 20,000 sea lions from 1966-1998. Such catches have decreased significantly, but in all likelihood only because the overall population has dropped precipitously.

The leading explanation for the continued decline is that Steller sea lions are not able to get enough to eat.

Critical Habitat Overfished

In 1993, the National Marine Fisheries Service designated critical habitat for Steller sea lions, which includes 20 nautical miles around major rookeries and haulouts, as well as three larger aquatic foraging areas. Critical habitat is the area essential to the Steller's survival and recovery, in this case because those zones contain essential prey resources for Steller sea lions. See the critical habitat map in this packet.

Despite the importance of adequate prey, industrial trawling in designated Steller sea lion critical habitat has skyrocketed in the 1990's. Pollock trawlers, in particular, conduct intense "pulse" fishing in Steller sea lion critical habitat, catching millions of pounds of fish in just a few hours.

In part because of this concentration in critical-habitat, in 1998 NMFS determined that the pollock fisheries jeopardized the continued existence of Steller sea lions, adversely modified their critical habitat, and that major changes were needed in the management of the pollock fisheries in the North Pacific.

Facts About Fishing in Critical Habitat:

- In the late 1970's annual catches of pollock in sea lion critical habitat averaged 200 million – 600 million pounds.
- By 1996, trawlers were removing three times that amount of pollock (1.74 billion pounds) from critical habitat.
- More than 70% of all pollock fished from the Bering Sea was taken just from sea lion critical habitat during 1992-1996 fishing seasons.
- In the Gulf of Alaska, most groundfish (50%-80%) has been caught in critical habitat since the mid-1980's.
- A major increase in Atka mackerel catches has resulted in a dramatic increase in total tons of mackerel removed from critical habitat areas also.

