



The *Mail Buoy*



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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

(Click on the title you wish to navigate to)

<i>APO BIZ:</i>	2
<i>Gathering of the Troops for the Next Observer Conference</i>	2
<i>DREAM JOB OF THE QUARTER:</i>	2
<i>Environmental Technicians in Antarctica</i>	2
<i>GLOBAL SPECTRUM:</i>	4
<i>Australian Digital (On-deck) Observer Data Collection</i>	4
<i>REGIONAL UPDATES:</i>	5
THE NORTH PACIFIC (USA):	5
<i>Just Another Christmas on the Bering</i>	5
<i>Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program, Summer 2005</i>	7
<i>Monitoring the Great Biological Diversity in Alaskan Waters</i>	10
<i>Contract Negotiations Approaching in September</i>	14
THE PACIFIC ISLANDS (USA):	15
<i>There's a New Sheriff in Town</i>	15
<i>LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND COLUMNS:</i>	15
<i>Australian Fisheries Management Authority responds to MRAG</i>	15
<i>Ask Uncle Blobbo</i>	16
<i>IMPORTANT CONTACTS AND WEBSITES:</i>	18

APO BIZ:

Gathering of the Troops for the Next Observer Conference

The APO is organizing a pre-conference "meeting of the minds" for all observers (current and prior) at the International Fisheries Observer Conference (IFOC), to be held in Victoria, B.C.; May 2007. The purpose of this meeting will be to:

- Share why we came to the conference (i.e. our personal goals as observers) so that we can network with those who have similar goals;
- Prepare ourselves for the issues that will be covered (or not covered!) in the panels and Working Groups;
- Investigate issues that do not appear on the agenda of the conference;
- Have some good fun and get to know one another.

We would like to have this meeting somewhere quiet and then transfer to a cool spot in town. Any suggestions?!?

The APO would also like to encourage observers who wish to attend the conference to do so. The IFOC Steering Committee will be putting a call out for papers and for Working Group members here in the next few months, so we need to be as prepared as possible. If you'd like to be on the mailing list for IFOC updates, please check out their website, at: www.fisheriesobserverconference.com. Observers need to be as organized as we can be come May 2007. Please, contact Liz Mitchell (emitch@efn.org) or Keith Davis (lblegend@yahoo.com) for more information regarding the IFOC and the APO pre-conference Meeting.

DREAM JOB OF THE QUARTER:

Environmental Technicians in Antarctica

Dave Wagenheim; Observer/ObserverNet Manager/APO Board; North Pacific

Seeking a unique adventure as well as employment? How would you like to be one of the few people on the planet to have the opportunity to live and work in Antarctica? Raytheon Polar Services is the primary contractor for the National Science Foundation's (NSF) U.S. Antarctic Program. They are currently looking for Environmental Technicians to deploy to McMurdo, South Pole or Palmer Antarctic research stations on a contract basis, beginning in August of 2006.

The contracts start in August or October and run through February. They are looking for Primary and Alternate employees to fill all contract positions. The Primary is first in line for the position. The Alternate is next in line to deploy, should the Primary be unable to meet the deployment requirements.

Responsibilities:

On Station, the Environmental Technician interfaces with environmental staff, primarily, and laboratory staff, principal investigators and subcontractors, secondarily, regarding operation of Environmental equipment and instrumentation. You must maintain a working knowledge of the operation and maintenance of instrumentation, including but not limited to such general environmental monitoring laboratory equipment as ambient air gas analyzers, particulate and dioxin/furan samplers, photoionization detectors, oxygen meters, current meters, composite wastewater samplers, TPH and VOC analyzers, and data collection and archiving devices. Then, Environmental Technicians must ensure accurate inventories of spare parts and supplies for repairing and calibrating equipment and instrumentation. You also are required to keep an accurate inventory of all consumable laboratory and sampling supplies and are responsible for ordering new ones. You shall collect environmental samples (ambient and source) for monitoring purposes. Such sample collection includes wastewater, water, potable water, air, sediment, soil, ice, and snow. You will also assist in performing laboratory analysis of water and wastewater samples for measurements of biological oxygen demand (BOD), volatile suspended solids, phosphorus, nitrogen, nitrite, nitrate, total Kjeldahl nitrogen, alkalinity, hardness, pH, chlorine residue, dissolved oxygen, and coliforms. You are expected to record data and prepare reports as required. All on-ice monitoring and sampling programs should be coordinated with the Environmental Engineer. Solicit guidance from the NSF Environmental Officer and NSF Safety and Health Officer as needed.

Qualifications:

A BS degree in Environmental Health, Environmental Science, Biology, Chemistry, or closely related field is required. Two to five years of responsible experience related to environmental sampling, monitoring, instrumentation, and laboratory analyses is also a requisite. You must have good writing skills as well. If you like to live on the edge and are interested in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – go to RayJobs.com and apply today.

(See www.rayjobs.com/index.cfm?NavID=119 for the specific announcement)

******If you've got a "Dream Job" you would like to share with your compadres please submit it to the editor!***

Australian Digital (On-deck) Observer Data Collection

Steve Auld; Senior Observer; Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMFA)

Data collection for an observer has always posed its own set of problems, from lost or wet data sheets, to recording data virtually underwater on a moving platform, sometimes moving quite violently. Then, another set of problems emerge after the voyage is completed: are the data sheets legible, are they complete, how long has it been from voyage completion to data lodgement at head office and how long between data lodgement and entry onto a computer database for analysis? Through all these processes, transposition errors occur and months may go by, while fisheries managers are requesting accurate and up to date information. The entire process, whilst not flawed, appeared to be archaic and inefficient. There had to be a better way. So after much debate and some research, it was decided that by the harnessing of current technology, an evolution of data collection, from pencil and paper (sharpened stick and refined bark) to one time electronic recording, should revolutionize the process and eliminate most of the problems associated with the current inefficient multi-step system.

With the current generation of mobile or satellite telephones and the introduction of Bluetooth radio, it is now possible for the observer to directly enter data into a small hand held computer on deck and send it immediately into the database at head office. While this is an ideal situation, it is not entirely practical, considering that a continual data connection is required for the duration of the voyage. So after more debate and research, it was decided that the ideal solution would be to directly enter data into a small hand held computer (PDA) on deck, then depending on the length of the voyage, either periodically download data or wait until voyage completion to download the data.

We now have a system implemented, that after six months of trials we believe is as close to real time data collection, that in reality is practical and cost effective. This system includes a PDA containing a simple database for data entry on deck. This database is form driven and navigated by simple button selection and mostly predetermined dropdown list values. Any variable data entered are subject to range validation on entry. This validation checks for basic typographic errors or unrealistic values. Data entry is extremely fast and accurate. For protection the PDA is contained in a waterproof, shockproof and crushproof case. The PDA is accessed by a clear membrane over the screen, the case is extremely comfortable in the hand and screen access is not at all hindered. A stand alone GPS is linked to the PDA via Bluetooth, providing instant and continuous vessel position, eliminating the need to visit the wheelhouse and interrogate the plotter. The GPS is also enclosed in a case of the same construction as the PDA case, although it also contains a strong magnet, and is no larger than a cigarette packet. The GPS can be placed anywhere on the vessel that has an uninterrupted view of the sky. At

periodic intervals during the voyage the PDA is synchronized to a laptop computer either via Bluetooth or USB cable. The laptop contains an intermediate database that imports and stores the PDA data in a compressed format. This data can then be emailed to a server at the head office. Once the data is received at the head office, it is then run through a further validation program to remove any inconsistencies, and is then exported straight into the main database. Fisheries managers now have the data before the vessel has even returned to port.

The system has currently been developed for pelagic longline and demersal longline, with development under way for trap and trawl fisheries. So far it has proved extremely easy to use and provides very accurate and consistent data. In comparison to traditional methods of data collection and data entry, paper-free data collection has proven itself to be very cost effective as well. Contact: Steve.Auld@afma.gov.au .

REGIONAL UPDATES

**** The APO staff is made up entirely of volunteers and we depend on updates from your region. Most APO board members' experience comes from the North Pacific, but we'd like input from all regions. Please submit descriptions/observer stories from any observer program.*

**** Links to all United States Fisheries Management Councils can be found on the National Marine Fisheries Services Website, at: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/councils.htm .*

The North Pacific (USA):

Just Another Christmas on the Bering

Jon Priest; Former Alaskan, Hawaiian, and New England Observer

In December 1995, I went out on a western brown king crab trip on a boat called the Tiffany. We left Dutch Harbor, Alaska, on the second or third and headed out west towards Atka Island. The boat had originally been built as a Coast Guard buoy tender in 1938, or thereabouts, and was converted to a crab boat in the "Red Boom" of the early seventies. By the time I boarded her, her salad days were but a distant memory. The bilge pumps pounded out a rheumy heart beat twenty-four seven, and the DC generator gave a disturbing flicker to the already dim lighting. Somehow too, even in the drafty freeze of December, the "fresh" food seemed to all be tainted. When I unearthed my rack from all of the clutter, I discovered one crusty blanket and a couple of the nastiest porno mags I have ever laid eyes on.

Two of my friends had been on this boat before me and warned me about the crew. What you might have to call the first Mate under happier circumstances was a giant creature with serious anger management issues. One morning in a fit of rage he smashed out one of our dim galley lights with his fist because he hit his head on it. That turned out to be one of his more controlled days. The next in the chain of command liked to arbitrarily dress up as Batman. He also believed that he was switched at birth because of the Kennedy assassination. Those two facts were unrelated. The third crewman, the self-appointed Engineer, was really nuts. He was a homeless alcoholic whose only goal in life was to be elected to a public office. The Captain was very old, kind hearted, and never in control of the boat.

It took us a day and a half steam to reach the Island of Four Mountains, and by the time we got there the weather was so bad we had to anchor up. We sat on the hook for ten days playing cards and watching the same five movies until we lost our anchor. We jogged in the lee for four days after that, before we managed to shuffle out to the western grounds. I won't trouble with many details, only that the actual set and retrieving of the gear was rather dangerous as well as comical. Fortunately for everyone, we only fished for three days before we ran over our own buoy lines and had to retreat to the lee side of Atka. There we sat pondering our tragic fate until Christmas day.

On the morning of our savior's birth the captain came up with a brilliant plan- we would flood every available void in the front of the boat and then send someone over the side in a gumby suit to try and cut the line out of the wheel. I was elected to be the gumby suit guy, but democracy didn't carry that day. Instead the big angry guy got to go and, as it turned out he almost ended up being the smart one. As the plan moved into its latter phases, it first became apparent that the boat was beginning to list rather badly and then that it was actually sinking. The whole operation was stopped in the nick of time though, and the big guy never got to do any cutting. Eventually a diver flew out from Dutch to Atka and saved us, and we actually made it back to Dutch Harbor to ring in the New Year. I believe our offload was eighteen crab.



That was the third trip of my first contract as an observer in the North Pacific. Despite my initial urge to flee, I signed on for another stint and was out on an Opie floater by the end of January. I went on to work on over forty boats after that in a wide variety of fisheries and locations. But, for all that, I still rank my trip on the Tiffany as one of the best.

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Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program, Summer 2005

Paul Wilkens; Observer; North Pacific

Kodiak is a town, a bear, and an island. Part of an archipelago in the Gulf of Alaska, Kodiak Island is about 300 air miles southwest of Anchorage. My first observing job in 1998 was on shoreside trawlers off Kodiak, so I have a special affinity for the place. When the opportunity arose to work on “the back side” of the island (observing the set-net salmon fishery for marine mammal interactions), I jumped at the chance. Forests and wilderness; islands and bays; birds and whales; salmon and bears! MRAG Americas was awarded the contract for 2005, and the Logistical Coordinator, Bryan Belay, hired 14 observers.

The Training

Greg Morgan and the staff at Observer Training Center in Anchorage taught our two-week training class. Class time was primarily devoted to helping the trainees better understand the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the goals of the Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program (AMMOP), the salmon fishery in Kodiak as prosecuted, and the parameters for data collection and recording. A significant portion of the training focused on safety and first aid. It ranged from CPR, first aid, and survival suit/life raft training; to bear country basics and a wilderness survival training presented by the Alaska Marine Safety and Education Association (AMSEA). As part of the AMSEA training, we were scheduled to have an overnight survival training on one of the beaches near town, with no more clothes than those on our backs, and no more supplies than would fit in a quart size Ziploc bag, with no fire building supplies. Although we did not end up doing the overnight (due to weather), I believe it should be a necessary part of training for future observers in this program because of the situational dangers inherent in the program.

Program Synopsis

Kodiak’s set-net fishery has one of the longest commercial salmon seasons in Alaska. It begins June 1 and lasts until September or later. There are three primary bay systems in the fishery, which corresponded to the locations of the field camps. In the Southwest, Akhiok field camp would be a base for observing in Olga Bay and Alitak Bay. The Chichagof is an 80-foot floating field camp that was used as a base for observing in the Uyak Bay region. And for observing in the very large Northeast region, there were to be several sites used as bases for observation: the 47 ft sailboat Kirsten Anne, a cabin at Village Islands for observing Uganik Bay sites, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife cabin in Terror Bay for Viekoda Bay, and Alderwood Retreat for Kupreanof Strait, Ouzinkie and Port Lions sites.

During the field season, on a daily basis, we would separate into “observation teams” (consisting of one observer and one skiff driver) tasked at monitoring for marine mammal and seabird incidental catch. We would then motor out (up to an hour) to a randomly selected permit holder and observe all of their “picks” (catch) for that day. We would

also do “soak watches,” observing the net for marine mammal interactions in the periods between picks.

Deployment

Saturday came and it was time to go out into the field. There was some last-minute preparations and shopping to be done - not the least of which was a replacement fishing license for the one I'd lost in Anchorage! I was initially assigned to the Chichagof with two other observers, Clif Passmore and Lorna Cameron. With extra people aboard, a deck full of supplies and food for two field camps, we departed at 5pm on May 28 from Kodiak harbor, leaving the lights and sounds and friends behind at Crab Fest. This melancholy feeling didn't last too long though- we were bound for Akhiok on the Western side of the island and a summer full of adventure! It had been a long last night in town and an even longer morning, so I decided to sleep until we arrived.

We arrived just after noon and anchored up in Alitak Bay. In a process that took most of the rest of the afternoon, we offloaded food, appliances, lumber, skiffs, and an ATV for the field camp at Akhiok. Finished with that, we waved goodbye to the observers and skiff drivers we'd become so close to in the previous two weeks and left for Uyak Bay. On the way over, we saw countless seabirds and cetaceans. I enjoyed the scenery of the southwest side. It was more like the Aleutians than I expected – long, low hills covered in brush. Ouzinkie and Port Lions on the Northeastern part of Kodiak Island, by contrast, are densely forested.

Uyak Bay - the adventure begins!

After a long steam, we arrived in Uyak Bay late at night. Home finally! The Chichagof was to be anchored in different parts of the bay throughout the summer, based on where random sampling needed us to be. We would follow the list in order, hitting two or three individual permits a day. We also were to use a method called “cluster sampling,” which had us observe several related permits in a single day (Some fisherman resisted this method, but after a few outings, we were able to explain our reasons for using it and it was generally accepted).

It's funny how observer training classes always seem so vague and conceptual until you get out into the field that first day, and get to see the gear and the fishers doing their jobs- everything begins to finally make some sense. The next morning, we skiffed out early to a single net permit to do a short soak watch. We met the fishermen, and watched their first pick. I asked for some basic gear information and for their pick schedule. These fishermen were very friendly, as were most I met during the summer. Observer data from 2002, the last year of the program, had helped prevent some legal hassles for the fishery, so a lot of the fishers were accommodating and accepting of the program. The site wasn't far from the Chichagof so we went back to the boat to have breakfast, touch base with the lead and drop the lines a bit to see if the halibut were biting. We did several other picks and soak watches that day, and I returned at the end of the day with a mountain of paperwork and excited by the prospect of a great summer to come.

Over the next several weeks, we worked quite hard since the fishery did not close when we had expected. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) was getting their escapement goals for rivers all over the north side of Kodiak, so the season remained open. In order to keep up with our sampling goals, we had teams out working just about every day. Eventually we fell into a routine of two teams out with one team staying on the boat to debrief and have a day off. This was certainly not as much free time as I'd experienced in the Cook Inlet AMMOP in 2000, which was only open 24 hours a week, but it still wasn't that bad. We were able to have fun on some nice weather days – fishing off the side of the Chichagof and on the Karluk River (and coming up empty-handed!), witnessing the brown bears scavenging at the dump in Larsen Bay, and the very memorable 4th of July/Canada Day barbeque and bonfire we had on the beach.

Village Islands

On July 6, a warm and sunny day, I bid farewell to the Chichagof and boarded the Kirsten Anne for the 10-hour trip to Village Islands. Captain Laurie served a lunch of fresh halibut ceviche that we ate while we cruised past whales and sea lions. We even had a pod of a dozen Dall's Porpoise bow riding with us for half an hour. Days like that are what observing is all about!

Life in the Village Islands was very different than life in Uyak Bay. The area is heavily forested, with a lot of trails and trees and berry bushes. We had a nice cabin to live in, with a wood stove and a banya. Most of all, I was happy to at last be based on land, after having spent most of the year living and working on cod longliners and the Chichagof. In fact, after I'd settled in, I set up my tent and slept in it for most of the rest of the summer.

In this region, there were fewer permit groups so the number of nets to be covered in a day was generally less. The area covered was larger than Uyak Bay, and the sites were more spread apart, so the skiff rides tended to be longer. In addition, the fishers tended to pick more often during the day. As a result of these things, actual time spent away from the cabin was greater.

Some sites in the Northeast district were too far to travel from Village Islands, so we had to have other ways to monitor those sites. I did a couple of stints using the Kirsten Anne as a base. We would anchor nearby a site the night before, and, using their skiff, motor 15 to 20 minutes to the net. Sometimes, we could see the fishers getting ready on shore and that was our cue to get on the water. Evenings passed by cruising to the next area, or just relaxing and playing cards.

Alderwood Retreat and Terror Bay Cabin were other base camps for distant sites. Alderwood Retreat, a fishing and adventure camp located in *Kupreanof Strait*, was run by *Stan and Ginger Duncan*. Located on a densely forested cliff, it has 4 main cabins for the caretakers and guests, a private beach and boat launch, a banya, acres of fields and forests and a creek running through it. It is a truly beautiful and peaceful place. Terror Bay Cabin is a Kodiak Island Wildlife Refuge cabin we used for the out of the way sites in

Uganik Bay. A former bear hunting cabin, it is located near some waterfalls, prime bear habitat, and some spectacular salmon streams.

My Summer Adventure Comes to a Close

On August 25, 2005, I boarded a floatplane bound for the city of Kodiak – My time in the field was done. I was somewhat sad to leave. I'd had such a great experience out there- I was able to see some beautiful and rare scenery and some amazing wildlife, and I was able to meet some very interesting and colorful people. I have a lot of memories from the summer of 2005 that will stay with me forever. I recommend the Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program to anyone who has a sense of adventure and a sense of humor.

The Future of the AMMOP

In October 2005, NMFS awarded Saltwater, Inc. of Anchorage, the new contract for the AMMOP, to observe the Yakutat salmon fishery in Southeast Alaska. According to Saltwater's Kathy Robinson, the timetable for the program is one year of logistic study and two years of field seasons. Saltwater expects to hire 12 to 15 lead and regular observers for the field seasons in 2007 and 2008. The salmon fishery to be observed in Yakutat is a set-net fishery, like the Kodiak fishery that was observed in 2001, 2002 and 2005. And like the Kodiak project, Saltwater Inc. expects to have observers based on land, conducting daily observations from small skiffs. Exact logistics will be decided later this summer. Marine Mammal Observers will not be hired for 2006. For more information regarding marine mammal observing in the North Pacific, check out the AMMOP website (www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/observers/mmop.htm) or contact Saltwater, Inc directly at: (907) 276-3241.

Monitoring the Great Biological Diversity in Alaskan Waters

Liz Mitchell; Fisheries Observer; North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program

There are 75 species and 5 subspecies of corals that have been identified in Alaskan waters- 25 additional species have only been identified to genus or family and some of these have yet to be described¹. Last year, NMFS biologists discovered 28 new species of sponges out of 105 species sampled in the Aleutian Islands and think there may be many more². Around Amchitka Island alone, 92 species of fish were recorded, including 18 species of sculpins.³

¹ Wing, B.L. and D.R. Barnard. 2004. A field guide to Alaskan corals. U.S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-AFSC-146, 67 p.

<<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/Publications/AFSC-TM/NOAA-TM-AFSC-146.pdf>>

² Morrison, E. 2005. Biologist Finds Trove of Sponges. USA Today, Oct. 9 2005.

<http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/discoveries/2005-10-09-sponge-alaska_x.htm>

³ USFWS Website: Marine Fishes of the Aleutian Islands:

The Gulf of Alaska has several volcanic seamount chains which support a diverse array of organisms. Because of their isolation, seamounts are particularly vulnerable to overfishing and are noted for high levels of endemism. "While the true rates of endemism are not known, it is known that studies of many seamounts have found species new to science and known nowhere else."⁴ Though seamounts are often targeted by Alaska groundfish fisheries, most invertebrates (except crab species) and non-commercial fish are not identified to species by observers in the North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program (NPGOP), and fishing practices are not recorded in detail.

Cold water corals lack the algae common in tropical coral reefs due to a lack of penetration of sunlight. They rely on plankton and organic matter for energy needs and are found in canyons, on seamounts, continental shelves and ocean ridges primarily in depths of 50 to 1000 meters. Some cold-water corals in Alaska are estimated to be hundreds of years old. Living cold water corals elsewhere have been radiocarbon-dated at over 8000 years old⁵ and have been known to grow at extremely slow rates (4-25 mm per year). When these cold-water corals are damaged, recovery could take centuries.⁶ There is also a close association of this habitat to commercial targeted species, such as Atka mackerel, Pacific cod, crabs and shrimps.⁷ Cold-water corals and sponges provide feeding opportunities, hiding places from predators, juvenile rearing grounds for target species and substrate for invertebrates that serve as prey for carnivorous fish species.

The NMFS recognizes that the primary threat to cold-water coral ecosystems is damage from fishing gear, such as bottom trawling^{8, 9}. "Trawling and dredging are especially problematic where the return interval (the time from one dredging or trawling event to the next) is shorter than the time it takes for the ecosystem to recover- extensive areas can be trawled 100-700% per year or more."¹⁰ "In the Atka mackerel (*Pleurogrammus monopterygius*) fishery of Seguam Pass in the Aleutian Islands, gorgonian corals were a major component of the bycatch 20 yrs ago. Now, however, after intensive fishing, corals are an infrequent part of the catch."¹¹ Targeting on spawning populations, while

<<http://alaskamaritime.fws.gov/wildlife-wildlands/wildlife/fish/aleutianlist.htm>>

⁴ Stocks, K. 2004. Seamount invertebrates: Composition and vulnerability to fishing. *In*: T. Marato and D. Pauly (eds). Seamounts: Biodiversity and Fisheries, pg. 17.

<http://www.seaaroundus.org/report/seamounts/07_KStocks/KS2_TEXT.pdf>

⁵ Milius, S. 2004. Corals Without Borders. Science News, 166 (6): 88

<<http://www.sciencenews.org/articles/20040807/bob8.asp>>

⁶ NMFS Ecosystem Assessment Website: <<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/ead/coldwatercorals.htm>>

⁷ Heifetz, J. 2002. Corals in Alaska: Distribution, Abundance and Species Association

<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/abl/MarFish/pdfs/Heifetz_coral_Symposium_paper_wp9_col.pdf>

⁸ NMFS Ecosystem Assessment Website: <<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/ead/coldwatercorals.htm>>

⁹ Freese, J.L. 2001. Trawl-induced damage to sponges observed from research submersible. *Mar. Fish.. Rev.*

<<http://www.highbeam.com/library/docfree.asp?DOCID=1G1:100732739&ctrlInfo=Round20%3AMode20e%3ADocG%3AResult&ao=>>>

¹⁰ Watling, L. and E.A. Norse. 1998. Disturbance of the seabed by mobile fishing gear: A comparison to forest clearcutting. *Conservation Biology*, 12 (6): 1180

¹¹ Red Tree Coral: An Essential Fish Habitat

<<http://www.oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/02davidson/background/corals/corals.html>>

destroying the breeding and rearing habitat in nurseries where target species guard their nests, doesn't seem very sustainable.

It took a court order for NMFS to address Essential Fish Habitat destruction in Alaska through NEPA, and NMFS released its Final Environmental Impact Statement (to identify EFH and Habitat Areas of Particular Concern in Alaska)¹² in 2005, concluding that bottom trawl gear does not adversely impact EFH "more than minimally" or "more than temporarily"- both conditions that would otherwise require NMFS to take regulatory action under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. What they're saying is that they cannot deny that bottom trawlers are destroying coral and sponge beds but that there isn't conclusive evidence regarding the target species' dependence upon this habitat.

At issue is how much scientific evidence is required before NMFS can call something essential, what they're using as the "best available science" and the institutionalized passivity of the NPGOP in helping resolve some of the major bycatch problems that face Alaskan groundfish fisheries. NMFS has videotaped Atka mackerel in close association with the same habitat that they admit is being adversely impacted by bottom trawling. But, according to NMFS, it is inconclusive that this habitat is essential to their survival. But there's enough evidence to say that there *probably* is an essential element to this bottom habitat since the footage was taken while they were spawning. Essentially, NMFS and the North Pacific Management Council are *not* using the precautionary approach, and blatantly go against the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries- it states (in reference to using the "best available science") that:

"The absence of adequate scientific information should not be used as a reason for postponing or failing to take conservation and management measures."

NMFS went far below in their EIS than what the Council was willing to bargain. The Council, which is primarily represented by various fishing industries, in turn, offered "above and beyond" what NMFS was requiring (which was nothing), reviewing proposals for fishing restrictions¹³, giving the *appearance* of a precautionary approach, and calling it as such. This process allows the Council to accept proposals at their discretion and then NMFS, in keeping with their commerce objectives, implements those discretions through regulation. Conveniently, under the MS-Act, regulatory change happens only if it is "practicable", which means it shall not impact the fishery economically.

Consequently, when negotiating for coral habitat protection and other trawl restriction zones during HAPC and EFH proposal reviews¹⁴, ironically they couldn't involve arguments for EFH protection (even though associations are clear) because of NMFS'

¹² NMFS Final Environmental Impact Statement for Essential Fish Habitat Identification and Conservation in Alaska <<http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/habitat/seis/efheis.htm>>

¹³ Report of the NPFMC Joint Plan Teams' review of Proposals for Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) March 8-9, 2004. <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/current_issues/efh/HAPC_PT_304.pdf>

¹⁴ Report of the NPFMC Joint Plan Teams' review of Proposals for Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) March 8-9, 2004. <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/current_issues/efh/HAPC_PT_304.pdf>

denial of negative impact of bottom trawling on EFH in their EIS. Rather, the proposals had to prove economically "practicable". Not surprisingly, the proposed restrictions¹⁵ that the Council was willing to accept from HAPC and EFH proposals are in areas that are either already closed by previously imposed restrictions or are areas that are generally not fished by Alaska's groundfish fleets.

The areas for closure were delineated by analyzing observer data, industry data, data from NOAA dives and NMFS trawl survey data. They determined coral "hot spots" by aggregating the data in 10 x 10 km plots. The plots chosen for closure were in areas where there was high coral abundance in depths that are fishable with the current technology, but have historically resulted in low target species catch- high coral bycatch and low target species catch... thus, not economically important to Alaska groundfish fishers.

Meanwhile, NMFS/NOAA is still trying to "better the available science" through some very impressive benthic and seamount-focused research¹⁶, and some research to study the degradation of essential fish habitat due to bottom trawling. However, this process is always one step behind advances in fishing technology... which may be deliberate in design. While we may not have enough funds to do all the dives and research to give us better available science, commercial fisheries are advancing in their capabilities to target increasingly complex bottom habitat.

There are 37,000 groundfish observer data collection days annually in these fisheries, but most non-commercial bycatch is going down as "unidentified" into the NPGOP database. The NPGOP could contribute substantially toward revealing impacts of bottom trawling on Essential Fish Habitat by improving on species ID and by collecting specific information regarding fishing gear and practices (as they are occurring). Isn't that the whole idea of "monitoring"? For instance, where is the data on the impacts upon canyons and seamounts from specific products such as "Canyon Buster" trawl doors?

There has been exhaustive research conducted on trawl impacts on benthic communities, but arguments go back and forth *ad nauseam* regarding the conclusions. Meanwhile, fishing technology advances unchecked and unmonitored. The lack of connect between bycatch and habitat studies and the observer program allows the impacts of fishing practices to remain obscure. The process we're employing to protect Essential Fish Habitat, especially in habitat that has such slow recovery once, is too little and too late. In Florida, "the *Oculina* banks were destroyed by bottom trawling and are now designated as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern".¹⁷

¹⁵ Proposed rules, Federal Register, March 22, 2006 and maps to proposed closures
<<http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/habitat/efh.htm>>

¹⁶ NOAA Ocean Explorer Website: <<http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/04alaska/welcome.html>>

¹⁷ Etnoyer, P. and L. Morgan. 2002. Occurrences of habitat-forming deepsea corals of the Northeast Pacific Ocean. A report to NOAA's Office of Habitat Conservation. Marine Conservation Biology Institute.
<http://www.mcbi.org/destructive/DSC_occurrences.pdf>

We know that Atka mackerel spawn with adhesive eggs in coral and sponge habitat and use sponges for protection of its young. We know that spawning males guard their nests in this habitat. We know that they are patchy in distribution and exhibit little movement between areas. We know that they are targeted during spawning. We know that observer bycatch is showing consistent association of Atka mackerel with bottom substrates (but at decreasing rates over time) and that Atka mackerel are vulnerable to localized depletion. Doesn't this raise any **Red Flags**?!?

If indeed, the fisheries in question are not harming an ecosystem that is potentially essential to the target species, shouldn't we be reserving caution, while looking for ways to prove that harm is *not* done, especially when we know that those fishing practices are harming the associated habitat? Regardless, our monitoring programs should be adaptable enough to respond to data needs. Rather, the approach taken is to first prove that harm *is* done, but while it's being done and without adequate monitoring. The only proof of harm done is when harm is done. Wouldn't it be a "practicable" approach in the long term to figure out habitat needs first before going in and destroying them?

Currently, observers in Alaska groundfish fisheries recorded over 1 million pounds of coral and sponge bycatch annually¹⁸. In general, observers could contribute to the knowledge of the biodiversity in Alaskan waters and associated fishing impacts by learning more about the habitat they will be observing, recording specific fishing practices and improving on their species identification. Most coral and sponges in Alaska have been described with just a few specimens, and many more are still being described at the time of this writing. NMFS researchers have requested observers to return black coral specimens to be submitted to the Smithsonian Institute and they are developing a sponge identification guide for fisheries observers. Some are impossible to identify in the field, so bringing back specimens would be an enormous contribution.¹⁹

[Contract Negotiations Approaching in September](#)

The North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program (NPGOP) observers' union contracts will soon be under negotiation: Alaskan Observers Inc. (AOI) for salary adjustments and Saltwater, Inc. and Northwest Observers (NOW) for full contract negotiations.

Please review your contract and post your concerns so that we may begin renewed discussions and bring issues to our Union Representative (Tracey Mayhew) before the first round of negotiations beginning sometime in September.

¹⁸ Justification of the Bottom Trawling and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act of 2005
<<http://www.mcabi.org/destructive/FS%20-%20Justification%20of%20the%20bill.pdf>>

¹⁹ Collection and preservation protocols are described in: Wing, B.L. and D.R. Barnard. 2004. A field guide to Alaskan corals. <<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/Publications/AFSC-TM/NOAA-TM-AFSC-146.pdf>>

The Pacific Islands (USA):

There's a New Sheriff in Town

After nearly a year of bidding negotiations with the NOAA contracting office and the NMFS, Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO), observers have a new employer in Hawaii. Northwest Observers (NWO) has been the contractor in Hawaii since they took over for Saltwater, Inc. in July 2004. Because of legal issues regarding the termination of Saltwater's contract and because of performance concerns regarding the current observer provider, the observer contract was put up for re-bid. NWO's contract was over in December 2005, but the contracting office needed more time for negotiations and NWO has henceforth been kept on as the sole observer provider in Hawaii since.

This last week MRAG Americas was awarded the contract in Hawaii. Brian Belay, the MRAG Program Manager for the Hawaii observer program, has been in Hawaii this week, meeting with NMFS and the Seafarer's Union to finalize the observer contracts. Tracey Mayhew, of the Seafarer's Union, has made several trips over the last few years down to Hawaii to negotiate contracts with NWO and to speak with observers, but observers in this region have yet to be officially represented by any Union. Now, as it seems, the Union will be in place in Hawaii.

Brian Belay stated in a recent e-mail that MRAG Americas will be deploying observers starting on June 15th. The APO would like to wish Hawaiian observers luck with the forthcoming employer change-over and hope that your new employer and union treat you well. Please, let us know if you have any concerns or comments regarding your transition.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND COLUMNS:

Australian Fisheries Management Authority responds to MRAG

Dear Editor of the Mail Buoy:

Many thanks for your newsletter. It is an excellent initiative and fills a real niche in bringing the global community of fisheries observers together.

I read with interest the February 2006 article from Bob Trumble at MRAG Americas regarding the attempted trial observer program in the NSW State managed Ocean Haul fishery. My understanding of the trial was that it failed to meet the trial objectives. This was not because of anything to do with MRAG or the observer efforts, but more a consequence of trying to trial an observer program in a highly variable, ephemeral fishery

that is accessed by part-time, land-based fishers. A brave experiment perhaps, but a difficult one to observe for sure! However, I did take issue with Mr Trumble's assertion that following completion of the trials that the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) also contacted MRAG Americas, implying that we were also interested in seeking observer services from this company and that this could open up opportunities for interested observers. This is not true.

As the person responsible for all Observer Programs run by AFMA, I can tell you that we did not contact MRAG in this regard. We run a large in-house Observer service at AFMA and we do not intend to outsource these services at the present time. As we routinely circulate your newsletter to all our regional observer staff, this sort of statement can lead to speculation and uncertainty in the minds of our observer staff about the future of their job. In fact, recent political pressure in the Commonwealth fisheries in Australia has raised the profile of the need for observer programs to collect independent data to underpin sound management. Our Minister has responded by directing AFMA to extend observer programs across all our fisheries!

AFMA runs by far the largest Observer services program in Australia and it is growing. We currently employ about 20 dedicated observers. Interested people should have a look at our web site www.afma.gov.au . Employment opportunities do exist, but citizenship can be an issue depending upon the terms of the employment. Interested observers should contact me directly (details below).

Yours sincerely,

Bruce Wallner

Senior Manager Research and Data/ AFMA

Tel: (02) 6272 4447/ Mob: 0400 700 942/ E-mail: bruce.wallner@afma.gov.au

[Ask Uncle Blobbo](#)

(Veteran observer Mark Wormington responds to peers, fears and convenient ciphers)

Dear Uncle Blobbo:

Why waste time trying to change resource management policy, or any other aspect of governance, when there's nothing I can do about it?

Thanks anyway,

Dorothy Matt

Dear Dorothy,

You've contracted a severe case of mistaken identity. Let me explain. The real you would not choose to lie doggo in a mosquito-infested hothouse intending to sweat her way out of it. Your better self has over-identified with the bloodsuckers. What we have here is capture-bonding, Stockholm syndrome. You're Patty Hearst without the inheritance, honey, and even Kansas ain't in Kansas anymore.

Your condition is increasingly reflected at the population level, where we tend to confuse America with the Economy -- where "We the People" amount to the GDP, grossly domesticated products of our uneconomic growth. Our flawed constitution was in any case built to last as long as its checks and balances were ably nurtured before an engaged citizenry. The national budget we've taken to balancing by way of loans from export countries and bounced checks to Mother Nature. When the bill collector calls, we'll let junior answer the phone.

Reflexive consumerism gives us endless options, plenty of them unworthy of consideration. In even a sub-global economy of scale our hot-selling false choices kill the competition: good guys vs. bad guys; faith vs. reason; liberal vs. conservative; environment vs. economy.

How did we get so sloppy? Corporations are not persons. Money is not free speech... unless, we're speaking merely legally.

Dorothy, we've no choice but to organize and to act. Concrete example: in the name of reclaiming at least co-equal civic status with the corporate-type person I am now obliged to launch DUBACLE, a sole proprietorship in search of a wilier legal structure -- a future conception beyond the grasp of our present caliber of legislator.

Dear Uncle Blobbo's Arbitrary Contract Labor Enterprises seeks fair exchange in a truly free market, one not subsidized by our deprivation of future generations of persons, artificial or real.

There- full disclosure. Observer Providers, I promise I've no designs on your turf. NOAA, ditto. Fishers, any foggy designs on y'all's turf, I've lost somewhere between my meniscus and my gallbladder.

Good Luck,

Uncle Blobbo

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NOAA jobs	www.jobs.doc.gov
International Observer Conferences	www.fisheriesobserverconference.com

*** *Mail Buoy submissions for the next newsletter are due by the middle of August 2006.*