



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE



National Seabird Program

NOAA Fisheries

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<http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seabirds/national.htm>

photo from: P. Clapham, NOAA

Healthy Oceans Matter

NOAA Fisheries National Seabird Program

The NOAA Fisheries National Seabird Program addresses an array of seabird issues--- monitoring and reducing seabird bycatch in US marine fisheries, working globally to reduce seabird interactions in international fisheries, and promoting the importance of seabirds as ecosystem indicators and a vital component of healthy ocean ecosystems.

Background

Seabirds are of interest to and are studied by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA Fisheries has a responsibility through various statutory authorities and agency actions to monitor, understand, and mitigate the effects of seabird bycatch, as well as to manage the coastal and marine habitats that seabirds depend on.

In 2001 the United States finalized its National Plan of Action for Reducing the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (NPOA-Seabirds) resulting in the establishment of NOAA Fisheries' National Seabird Program (NSP). Focus areas for the NPOA-Seabirds and NSP include:

- Seabird Bycatch: Mitigate the direct takes of seabirds by fisheries (e.g., incidental catch or bycatch, gear entanglement) and understand the effects of seabird bycatch, addressing both domestic and international fishery issues.
- Seabirds as Valuable Ecosystem Indicators: Seabird distribution and abundance can reflect physical and biological oceanographic changes, abundance and distribution of mid trophic-level organisms, and the effects of climate change on apex predators. Further, contaminant levels in seabirds can provide insight into possible pollution events in particular ecosystems. And, unlike so many marine organisms, seabirds are relatively easy to sample. Because the state of the ecosystem directly affects the resources for which NOAA Fisheries has management responsibility, ecosystem integrators and indicators such as seabirds are critical components of Integrated Ecosystem Assessments and can advance the science of ecosystem management for NOAA Fisheries.

The NSP is led by a National Coordinator and implemented regionally through seabird points of contact at each Regional Office, Science Center, and Headquarters office. The NSP recognized that the development of a National Seabird Strategic Plan could help identify agency priorities with respect to seabird issues and to generally elevate awareness regarding the ecological value of seabirds and seabird research.

NOAA Fisheries National Seabird Workshop

In September 2009, NOAA Fisheries hosted its first National Seabird Workshop. The primary goal of this workshop was to initiate the development of a National Seabird Strategic Plan that can be used to:

- Describe NOAA Fisheries seabird activities;
- Identify important partnerships with other management agencies;
- Guide NOAA Fisheries seabird management and science; and
- Provide seabird-related input to NOAA's strategic planning and budgeting process.

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The workshop took place September 9–11, 2009, at NOAA Fisheries' Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, Washington. Representatives attended from each of the NOAA Fisheries Regional Offices, Science Centers, and Headquarters offices. Invited experts from NOAA International Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), University of Washington, Washington Sea Grant, and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council also participated.

Emergent Themes for Next Steps

Several themes emerged from the workshop, which were considered necessary areas of focus, particularly in the near term (within 5 years):



Photo: L. Ballance, NOAA.

Seabird observers on NOAA cruises collect important data on seabird abundance and distribution to contribute to ecosystem assessments.

Continue working on seabird bycatch issues. Participants agreed on the need to conduct regular seabird bycatch assessments and develop and/or prescribe measures to reduce this bycatch.

Improving connections, networks, and educational outreach. Workshop participants suggested more symposia at conferences, more formal ties with the USFWS for sharing responsibilities and interagency coordination, and more joint efforts among NOAA Fisheries centers and offices and with external agencies and among regional inter-stakeholder networks.

Creating a multi-agency/entity inventory of spatial/temporal coverage of existing data and data collection methods. Participants agreed that creation and maintenance of a seabird metadatabase was important. Such a database would include information on geographic region, species, years, bycatch data, and seasons for which seabird data were available and a listing of the general types of data. In addition to providing an inventory of available data, this database would be valuable in identifying data gaps. Creation of this inventory would be consistent with efforts needed to carry out NOAA's Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning process.

Using seabirds as indicators to improve ecosystem-based approaches to management. Seabirds are well-known indicators of ecosystem state. Seabird data can, therefore, potentially be used to improve ecosystem-based management, for example, by facilitating predictive models focused on addressing the effects of climate change on directly managed species or contributing to marine spatial planning. Participants suggested integrated national and international partnerships to advance ecosystem modeling and to further bycatch reduction efforts. Results of these various efforts could be used in predictive climate and ecological models, stock assessments, off-site mitigation efforts, and global marine assessments. Annual national and regional data and progress reports should be available. Participants envisioned incorporation of seabirds into NOAA Fisheries' annual national and regional strategic plans.