

Why Should We Help Russians Avoid Albatross?

Our fisheries could be shut down if we don't

Now and then, when editorial space is scarce and somebody sends us an opinion piece that's too good to reject and too timely to molder for a month, I give up my bully pulpit. This is one of those occasions. The issue Mark Lundsten raises here could erupt upon the Alaska longline fleet at any time, but there's a lot we can do about it. The fleet and the National Marine Fisheries Service already know how to solve this problem, as Mark can attest. As owner of the longliner Masonic, he participated in experiments to identify the most effective bird deterrent measures, work that helped position the Alaska fleet to meet a "make-or-break" endangered-species challenge. After 27 years fishing in the North Pacific, he sold his operation in 2002. Since then he has served on the National Academy of Science's Ocean Studies Board committee on cooperative research, among other projects.

— Editor

BY MARK LUNDSTEN



The endangered short-tailed albatross forages in Alaska — and in Russia.

That's a problem for Alaska. If Russia catches even a few of them, Alaska will pay. It doesn't matter that Alaskan fleets already have effective seabird bycatch regulations and have no say over how the Russians fish. Our Endangered Species Act (ESA) is draconian: boats in Alaska can face restrictions

and closures even if the harm to an endangered species is elsewhere. Alaska's only recourse is to work with the Russians directly and to extend the use of seabird deterrents to Russia, in whatever way possible, as soon as possible.

Hawaiian longliners know this problem well because of sea turtles. Egg collectors on sandy beaches and international, unregulated fishing have caused a serious decline in sea turtles. The only group to face restrictions (so far) is the U.S. fleet, even when they develop viable methods of deterring turtles from their gear. They have endured numerous restrictions, closures of huge sections of the Pacific, and relentless scrutiny from environmental groups. Meanwhile, other nations' fleets have no restrictions. It's not fair, but it's how public policy works when a fleet is subject to the ESA and has open and accessible management. Alaska has the same vulnerability.

I spent the first week of June in the Russian Far East with staff members of the World Wildlife Fund and Ed Melvin of Washington Sea Grant. Ed and I were invited by WWF to tell fishermen how Alaskan longline fishermen avoid killing seabirds. In summary, we told them how our regulations work and how they actually make money for the Alaska fleets: Our baits catch fish, not birds.

The Russians agreed that keeping birds off the gear was a good idea. But after a chaotic first decade of capitalist fishing, includ-

ing two currency devaluations, their first concern is to have a future. They have work to do — on stocks and markets, on management and enforcement, on the value of the ruble. Plus, they have no Russian ESA and no mandates to use bird deterrents. Seabirds aren't a priority.

But endangered albatrosses are a priority in Alaska, and they fly all over the North Pacific. Ed Melvin charted the foraging flights of short-tailed albatrosses that he hooked up with EPIRB-style transmitters last summer. The tracks of those birds extend from their nests on Torishima Island to the Gulf of Alaska to the Kamchatka peninsula. Russian longliners could catch them as easily as Alaskans.

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The best way to deal with Russia is to do what has proven to work. The development of the seabird bycatch regulations in Alaska is a model of the kind of proactive conservation needed once again. An incendiary issue all over the globe, seabird bycatch did not incite political or legal warfare in Alaska because the fleet learned about the issue, took the problem in hand, and developed a solution — including streamer lines and other measures. Then, in conjunction with scientists, they proved that these methods work and could be used as the basis for a regulation that now mandates bird avoidance practices throughout the fleet. It was tedious work, but it succeeded, and it changed things.

During this process, some environmental NGOs did nothing but write editorials about seabirds slaughtered by greedy fishermen. Political evolution did not favor them. Rather it favored those who cooperated to find a solution. The "confronters" eventually had to go along, or be left out. The keys to approaching this Russian problem are the same ones — education, then cooperation and research, not confrontation.

Convincing Russians to tow streamer lines won't be the same as convincing the Alaskan fleets and the North Pacific Council. But a few lessons are obvious:

- 1) Streamer lines and a few other basic steps prevent seabird mortality.
- 2) Russians and Alaskans both want a future.
- 3) NGOs and fishermen get more done with a common cause than with a war.
- 4) Lots of direct communication will be necessary.
- 5) The ball is in Alaska's court, not Russia's.

We all know the ocean is one ocean. We are slowly learning that fishermen are one fleet. ■