

U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission meets in Anchorage

The 4th meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission was held from 25-27 June 2012 in Anchorage, Alaska (U.S.A.). Attendees included representatives from the United States and the Russian Federation representing federal, state, and Native interests in polar bear conservation. The goal of the meeting was to continue implementation of a Bilateral Treaty for the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population, which inhabits the Bering and Chukchi seas and is shared between the U.S. and Russia.

The Commission approved a multiyear quota system that will help to ensure that levels of traditional, subsistence harvest by Native peoples are sustainable. This system will be implemented in western Alaska in coming years through a collaborative effort of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alaska Nanuuq Commission. Subsistence harvest of the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population in Chukotka, Russia, was banned in 1956. The Commission also approved the continued development of an official website, and adopted country-specific harvest seasons. Scientists presented preliminary findings suggesting that the Alaska-Chukotka population is currently capable of growing despite observed loss of the polar bear's sea ice habitat. All management actions for this population—including sustainable harvest levels—will continue to be reviewed annually using information from research and monitoring studies.

A joint U.S.-Russia study plan was adopted, which identifies high-priority research and Traditional Ecological Knowledge studies to provide the information necessary for sound polar bear management. Initiatives for co-management of the population by federal and Native stakeholders include efforts to increase education, minimize human-polar bear conflicts, and develop country-specific management plans for the subsistence harvest of polar bears by Native peoples for traditional purposes.

Geoffrey Haskett, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Alaska Region, and Amirkhan Amirkhanov, Deputy Head of the Federal Supervisory Natural Resources Management Service, viewed the meeting as an excellent example of collaboration between the U.S. and Russia on Arctic issues, and praised the countries' unity of vision for this shared polar bear population.