

BERING SEA ELDERS GROUP

Spring Newsletter, 2012

Inuuniagniqput –

The way we live as people
(Inupiaq)

Yuungnaqsaraq –

Our way of being
(Central Yup'ik)

Key yaq tak tak –

Way of life
(St. Lawrence Yupik)

OUR MISSION

To bring together elders as one voice to protect our traditional ways of life and the ocean web of life that supports the resources we rely on, and our children's future.

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Report from the Elders Group Summit



Photo: Amy Snider

The Bering Sea Elders Group held a summit of all the 39 participating tribes November 2-3, 2011 at the Yupiit Piciryarait Cultural Center in Bethel. This was the first full gathering of elders from both the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait regions. The Elders Group appreciates the services of Sky Starkey who facilitated the meeting and helped the elders achieve the meeting goals.

See Summit, p. 2

The Northern Bering Sea: Our Way of Life Mapping Project Completed

The purpose of the mapping project was to show extensive areas where Alaska Native hunters and local fishermen harvest ocean resources, and the marine waters important to the resources we rely on. It illustrates that the whole northern Bering Sea is the storehouse that supports our way of life.



As we face threats to the northern Bering Sea, this report can support our leaders and inform outside decision-makers about how we depend on the ocean and how our way of life is inseparable from it.

"It's critical to have all this knowledge written down so we can show it to those marine scientists. We need to show them that our people along the coast, we have to have our food from out in the ocean."

- Charles Seccheus, Sr. – Elim



Photo: Muriel Morse

See Mapping Project, p. 2

Summit, continued from page 1...

The purpose of the Summit was to:

- Set a direction for the organization that reflects how the Elders Group wants to use its voice and influence in the future related to traditional resources and values.
- How the Elders Group can fill a necessary role that is different and complimentary to what tribal organizations already do, and is harmonious with the governmental authority of our tribes.
- Adopt a resolution expressing the Elders Group's vision and direction for the future.
- Address organizational structure and sustainability.
- Next steps on current program issues and new initiatives.



Chairman David Bill, Sr.



Fred Phillip speaks to Elders Group in Bethel

With clear direction from the elders, staff developed a plan with objectives, strategies, and anticipated outcomes for the next five years. This is available at www.beringseaelders.org.

The Elders Group passed several resolutions at the Bethel Summit. Resolutions expressing our mission and vision for the Northern Bering Sea are reprinted here on pages 4-7. All are available on the Elders Group website.



David O. David, Kwigillingok



Tim Andrew, AVCP



Irene Aukongak, Golovin



Leo Moses, Chevak
Summit translator



Muriel Morse
gives update on
mapping project

All photos: Amy Snider

Mapping Project, continued from page 1...

Excerpts from *The Northern Bering Sea: Our Way of Life*

On Sharing

What we catch we share with elders and these young people they share with somebody that didn't catch one...Around here when somebody goes hunting you know who they are, when they catch they share with us. And when we catch we share with them.

- Gordon Westlock, Emmonak

On Gratitude & Respect

I take some snow and when I catch a bearded seal, I'll put some in my mouth, melt it, and put it in the mouth and the hand of the seal for its spirit to come to me again. Because whatever remains that I have I put it back in the water so that his spirit can go back to the spirit world and also come back to me.

- John Pingayak, Chevak

On Stewardship

There are habitats near St. Matthew Island where marine mammals stay in winter time...Seals, walrus, whales all spend their winters there. Then comes springtime, about March depending on how fast the ice melts, they start moving north from there...The important part is the migration patterns and the habitats. We don't want them to be disturbed regardless of how far they are from our hunting area.

- Elders, Gambell

On Learning

Children and youth are taught to remember stories and information accurately, to 'put it into your body,' by techniques such as keeping one's head still while listening.
- From "Traditional Knowledge of the Bowhead Whale around St. Lawrence Island, Alaska," by George Noongwook et al and published in the scientific journal *Arctic* in 2007.

Looking for Solutions to Protect Subsistence Around Nunivak Island and Kuskokwim Bay: Update on Elders Group and AVCP Negotiations with the Bottom Trawl Fleet

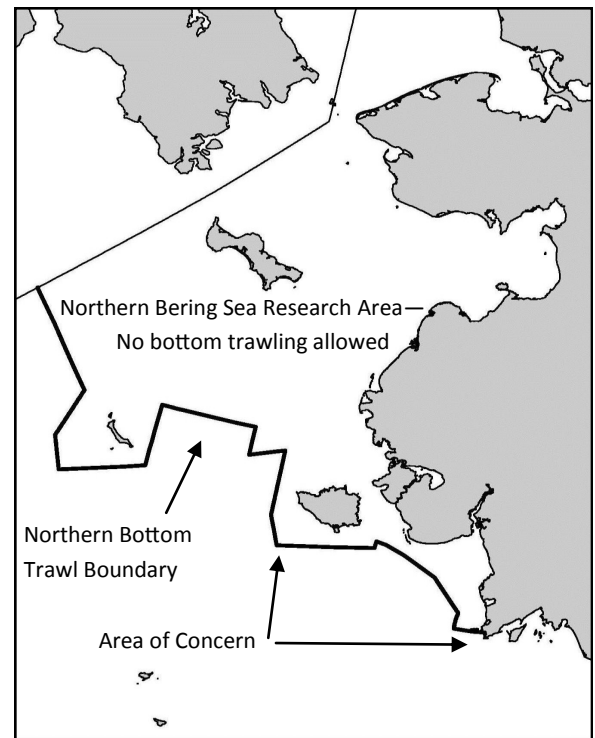
The Bering Sea Elders Group was established in 2007 because of our concerns about bottom trawling near some of our villages and possible movement of fishing fleets into northern waters where they had not operated in the past. That year, with support from 25 tribes, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) created a northern bottom trawl boundary.

When the boundary was created, federal fishery managers agreed to reconsider the part between Nunivak Island and Cape Newenham to better protect subsistence in the future. In this area, the boundary is 15-20 miles from shore. There are a couple of ways we could resolve this issue. First, we could take our issue directly to the NPFMC and ask them to move the trawl fleet farther from shore. However, the NPFMC process can take years, and it is complex and risky. So instead, we have focused on trying to reach an agreement with the Alaska Seafood Cooperative (AKSC), which is the organization that oversees most of the bottom trawl vessels in our region. As a cooperative, the fishing fleet can work with us and hold their vessels to an agreement. If we can come to an agreement with AKSC, it is most likely that the NPFMC will accept it. If we don't come to an agreement, we will have to convince the NPFMC to protect subsistence.

We have met with AKSC more than 15 times since October 2008. For example, in January 2011, members of AKSC traveled to the Elders Group Summit in Nome and provided a detailed presentation on their fishery, bycatch and trawl gear. We met with AKSC again in April 2011 in Bethel, where we showed them maps of subsistence use areas.

In June 2011, we sent them a proposal to extend the current boundary 50 miles from shore. In October, we received a completely different proposal from AKSC – to establish incentives to reduce halibut bycatch, to create a working group with members from the Bering Sea Elders Group, AVCP and AKSC, and to fund scientific research that could answer questions about the impacts of trawling and the movement of halibut in our area. Last November, we thanked the AKSC for their proposal, but we told them it was not enough.

The Elders Group made another proposal to AKSC with several options including: 1) closing certain areas to trawling for halibut and walrus protection; 2) lowering halibut bycatch in the yellowfin sole trawl fishery; 3) limiting the time that trawlers can be in an area; and 4) imposing a financial penalty on each halibut caught to encourage them to avoid it and then



using that money to fund research or other joint activities. We also created several maps to figure out where the halibut and trawl fisheries overlap, and where walrus and the trawl fishery overlap. This helps in identifying areas of concern.

Last month we met again to see if there is enough common ground to support continued effort to reach a formal agreement. ***Can continuing to share ideas and information get***

us to an acceptable solution? The Elders Group remains committed to addressing bycatch, the protection of sensitive areas for subsistence, areas used by walrus, and the value in research to understand the ecosystem better. This last meeting produced new momentum and the AKSC agreed they are willing to address these issues with us — to better protect our subsistence and small scale halibut fishery, while allowing for the trawl fleet to also have a successful yellowfin sole fishery.

We plan a two-day session in May to push forward on an agreement. If we are successful, we will then share that agreement with the tribes in the region and ask if it is acceptable.



In 2010 there were 63,800 pounds of halibut killed as bycatch in the trawl fishery in the area around Nunivak Island and Kuskokwim Bay (data provided by AKSC) – This is more than the average amount of halibut harvested for subsistence by all the area villages combined (data provided by IPHC & ADFG).

Resolution Expressing Our Mission

WHEREAS, our tribes along the coast have depended on the abundant resources of the Bering Sea, the land and air from time immemorial, and our spirit and ways of life are inseparable from them; and

WHEREAS, the knowledge of the Elders about how to live with the ocean and the land was given to us by our ancestors with instructions not to keep it for ourselves, but to pass it on to our children so that they may continue to prosper and continue our way of being; and

WHEREAS, the Bering Sea is a whole ecosystem, in which each part is connected to all other parts in an inter-dependent web of life; and

WHEREAS, the resources we rely on were given to us by the Creator, and we have a responsibility to care for those resources and to pass on this inheritance to our children and grand-children; and

WHEREAS, the Elders are messengers about our traditional values and how to live on the land and ocean; and

WHEREAS, we are stronger by working together as one voice and one mind.

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED THAT the mission of the Bering Sea Elders Group is to bring together elders as one voice to protect our traditional ways of life and the ocean web of life that supports the resources we rely on, and our children's future.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the Bering Sea Elders Group will serve as a messenger to our children, our tribal councils and the people who make decisions that affect our marine resources, ecosystem and ways of life.

The Bering Sea Elders Group seeks to work together with:

- Youth – to support our children in retaining our Native languages, hands-on learning about plants and animals, and learning about how to protect their rich cultural and natural inheritance; and
- Our tribes – to support their strong and full engagement in the management of our marine resources and ecosystem; and
- Our Native organizations, corporations and CDQ groups – to support their understanding of and engagement in the protection of our marine resources, ecosystem and ways of life; and
- Religious organizations; and
- City and borough governments, state and federal political leaders and agencies, including Alaska's congressional delegation.

(over)

Although issues that we face may evolve, and new issues may arise, the Bering Sea Elders Group aims to focus its support for our tribes in:

- Protecting our traditional marine hunting and fishing areas, the migration routes of the animals we rely on, and the whole ecosystem from harmful activities. This includes creating habitat conservation zones to address future concerns, and resolving conflict with the bottom trawl industry regarding the Nunivak Island-Kuskokwim Bay boundary; and
- Establishing a Northern Bering Sea reserve to protect the marine and coastal resources and our food security from future large-scale industrial activity thereby preserving the area as an inheritance for future generations; and
- Addressing threats to our salmon culture through protection of marine habitat and spawning grounds, and the reduction in salmon bycatch; and
- Addressing climate change and its effects on the ocean and the resources we rely on.

The Bering Sea Elders Group identifies the following ways, among others, to address these issues:

- Support amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act that are necessary to provide for greater protection for our marine resources and ecosystem, and to ensure a greater role for our tribes in fisheries management – options include creating a Bering Sea Fishery Management Council that represents our values, and establishing 1-2 tribal seats on North Pacific Fishery Management Council; and
- Create a management plan for our traditional marine hunting and fishing area designed to protect the resources and ecosystem, and to ensure our access and continued use of the resources that our people depend on; and
- Collaborate with federal and state resource managers to apply traditional knowledge in real decisions; and
- Seek to incorporate the indigenous peoples from the Russian side of the Bering Sea because the Bering Sea is one ecosystem and the people on both sides have the same needs.

The Bering Sea Elders Group is committed to working with our tribes, including regularly sharing information about activities of the Elders Group, and supporting them on issues affecting our traditional marine territory in the Bering Sea, the ecosystem and our children's future.

Passed November 3, 2011 at the Bering Sea Elders Group Summit – Bethel, Alaska.



David Bill, Sr. – Chair

Resolution Expressing a Vision for the Northern Bering Sea

PREAMBLE:

Alaska Native peoples living on the Bering Sea coast, keen observers of the world around us, are witnessing changes in seasonal patterns, sea ice and animals. In recent years Bering Sea ice has formed later in the year and melted earlier in spring. In some years, even when the ice extends far to the south, it is thin. These changes affect where different animals find food, how they survive and where they may be available to us for hunting.

While ocean temperatures and ice conditions in the Bering Sea vary greatly year-to-year, the long-term trend over time is expected to be warming. How the Northern Bering Sea ecosystem will be affected and the long-term future for our ocean resources is uncertain.

The teaching of our ancestors was based on respect for what the ocean provides. Respectful actions are rewarded by hunting success; disrespectful actions have negative consequences. We were taught never to waste what the Creator has given us, to share our food with the community and to listen to our Elders because they acquired wisdom over a long life and sharp observation. Today, while technology has changed, our traditional values and our hunting, fishing and gathering ways of life, remain the foundation of our culture. Respect for the natural world and caring for our natural resources are necessary for our people to continue thriving off the ocean and land, and providing for our children's inheritance.

WHEREAS: The Bering Sea Elders Group is an association of Elders established to work together as one voice for the protection of our traditional ways of life, the web of life that sustains the ocean resources we rely on and our children's future; and

WHEREAS: Federal fishery managers recognized the importance of the Northern Bering Sea by establishing a bottom trawl boundary to prevent these large-scale fishing fleets from moving into northern waters where they have not operated before; and

WHEREAS: Alaska Native tribes on the Bering Sea coast are concerned about the potential for future expansion of bottom trawl fisheries and other large-scale industries into the Northern Bering Sea because of the sensitivity of the whole ecosystem that supports our ways of life; and

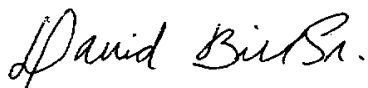
WHEREAS: The Association of Village Council Presidents and Kawerak, regional tribal consortiums, support the mission of the Bering Sea Elders Group.

(over)

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Bering Sea Elders Group:

1. Urges the federal government to undertake a rigorous tribal consultation process for all decisions affecting the Northern Bering Sea.
2. Recommends the formation of a Northern Bering Sea reserve as permanent protection from future large-scale industrial activities. The Northern Bering Sea should be reserved for traditional use and ecosystem research that brings together western science and traditional knowledge for continued understanding of climate change, and its consequences for marine life, ocean habitat, communities and cultures. This region warrants special attention because of its unique ecological and cultural characteristics:
 - The Northern Bering Sea is vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of climate change. The long-term consequences of climate change for the region are uncertain. Allowing bottom trawl fisheries or other large-scale industries into the region will add new stress to the already fragile ecosystem and the traditional resources we depend on.
 - Ocean habitat and the ice-dependent species that are listed under the Endangered Species Act, or designated as candidate species for listing, should be protected, including the critical habitat offshore in the Bering Sea pack ice established for the spectacled eider.
 - The Northern Bering Sea is already fully utilized by the tribes who have been thriving off of the ocean's bounty since time immemorial. Our local economies and food security are based on hunting, gathering and small-scale fisheries that would be damaged by the introduction of bottom trawl fisheries or other large-scale industries in the future.

Passed November 3, 2011 at the Bering Sea Elders Group Summit – Bethel, Alaska.



David Bill, Sr. – Chair

About the Bering Sea Elders Group

The Bering Sea Elders Group was established in 2007 due to our concerns about the proximity of bottom trawling to some of our villages and the potential movement of industrial fisheries into northern Bering Sea waters. That year many tribes promoted a bottom trawl boundary that was adopted by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

The Elders Group formed to bring elders together across the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait regions. We have one mind – to protect our traditional way of life, and the ocean web of life that supports the resources we rely on.

Bering Sea Elders Group—Executive Committee

David Bill, Sr., Toksook Bay – Chair (907) 717-5860

David O. David, Kwigillingok – Vice Chair

Michael Hunt, Kotlik

Dick Lincoln, Tununak – Treasurer

John Phillip, Kongiganak – Honorary Member

David Carl, Kipnuk – Sergeant at Arms

Charlie Saccheus, Elim

* Note: The Elders Group will be increasing the Executive Committee membership to include equal representation from the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait regions.

Acknowledgments

The Elders Group appreciates the participation and support from the Honorable Paul John, Traditional Chief of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region.

Bering Sea Fishermen's Association— For services they provide as the Elders Group fiscal sponsor.

Our donors for their financial support in 2010-2012:

The Oak Foundation * Donlin Gold * Alaska Conservation Foundation
ACF—Alaska Native Fund * Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation * Yukon Delta Fisheries Development Association * World Wildlife Fund * Oceana

And others for in-kind, volunteer and staff support from:

Association of Village Council Presidents * Kawerak, Inc. * Alaska Marine Conservation Council



These tribes are formal members of the Bering Sea Elders Group. Each tribe participates by resolution and designates an elder and alternate to serve on the Board of Directors.



Paul John, Sr. speaks to the Bering Sea Elders Group in Bethel.