

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

5<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Scientific Working Group of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission  
Shepherdstown, West Virginia, U.S.A.

02-03 June 2014

1. The fifth annual meeting of the Scientific Working Group (SWG) designated to support the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission (the “Commission”) took place on June 02-03, 2014 at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, USA. The SWG meeting was attended by 11 members of the SWG (including cochairs Eric Regehr and Stanislav Belikov; Attachment 1), as well as invited specialists and observers. The Commission is responsible for implementation of the *Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population*. The main objectives of the meeting were as follows: (1) review new research and findings for the Alaska-Chukotka (AC) polar bear population, (2) consider the potential impacts of development on the AC population, (3) review annual removals and provide a recommendation on sustainable harvest level to the Commission, and (4) update Terms of Reference and proposed membership of the SWG.
2. The SWG received the following presentations from members:
  - a) Review of new science and traditional ecological knowledge studies on the AC population in Russia (A. Boltunov, S. Belikov, N. Platonov, S. Kavry)
  - b) Review of new science and traditional ecological knowledge studies on the AC population in the U.S. (R. Wilson, K. Rode, J. Omelak on behalf of Charles Brower)
  - c) Review of 2013 subsistence harvest for the AC population in the U.S. (E. Regehr)
  - d) Review of historic and current removals of polar bears from the AC population in Russia (A. Kochnev)
3. The SWG received the following presentations from invited specialists:
  - a) Aerial surveys for ice-dependent seals in the Bering Sea (P. Boveng)
  - b) Current and proposed offshore oil exploration and development in the U.S. portion of the Chukchi Sea (J. Lewandowski)

- c) Practical aspects of monitoring and managing subsistence harvest from a law enforcement perspective in the U.S. (T. Whistler)
- d) Practical aspects of monitoring and managing subsistence harvest from a community perspective in the U.S. (J. Omelak)
- e) Emerging methods for remote sensing of polar bears using satellite imagery (S. Stapleton)

4. Members of the SWG made the following recommendation to the Commission:

The SWG recognized that new biological information considered at this meeting did not suggest the need to change the sustainable harvest level for polar bears from the AC population. Therefore, the SWG recommends no change to the current sustainable harvest level of up to 58 polar bears per year to be shared equally between the U.S. and Russia, of which no more than 1/3 will be female, or to the multiyear quota system adopted for the implementation of the harvest.

5. Members of the SWG reached the following decisions:

- a) The SWG reviewed priority studies as identified in the 2012 SWG document *Study Plan for the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population (2013-2015)*, and emphasized the need to focus on studies related to the following areas in the next few years (items not listed in priority order):
  - i. Estimates of vital rates (e.g., survival), population growth rate, and indices of population size that include an evaluation of sampling methodology
  - ii. Demographic modeling to evaluate sustainable harvest levels
  - iii. Monitoring other indices of population growth, including nutritional and physiological status and reproduction
  - iv. Coordination with ice-seal surveys tentatively planned for the Chukchi Sea region in 2016
  - v. Evaluate risks to polar bears associated with potential oil spills
- b) The SWG noted that the constraints of studying the AC population will continue to limit our ability to obtain precise estimates of population size and trend, even with the availability of new technologies. While current and future studies continue to reduce uncertainty, it is likely that the AC population will continue to be managed with estimates of demographic parameters that include considerable uncertainty, and with indices of population status, in the near future.

- c) The SWG adopted new Terms of Reference. The Group recognized the need to modify the Terms of Reference in 2015 to include provisions for the use and sharing of materials from meetings of the SWG.
  - d) The SWG recognized that dedicated outreach and discussion with communities is a necessary condition for successful conservation, monitoring and management of polar bears, including the implementation of a managed subsistence harvest.
  - e) The SWG recognized that continuation of research on Wrangel Island, including collaboration and the development of new study methods, is important for understanding trends in denning, reproduction, and land use for the AC population. The SWG recognized the importance of a workshop in the coming year, and of continuing and expanding research and monitoring on Wrangel Island, including field work in 2015.
  - f) The SWG called for continued support of U.S.-based research, and increased support for research activities in Russia.
  - g) The SWG agreed to continue evaluating new technologies, including high-resolution satellite imagery, for potential integration into ongoing research activities.
  - h) The SWG agreed to seek the resources necessary to translate new findings and make them widely available.
6. The meeting was attended by observers that made the following comments:
- a) The U.S. Marine Mammal Commission affirmed the importance of scientific information for the conservation of the AC population, and supported implementation of harvest management in 2015.
  - b) The World Wildlife Fund expressed support for current and increased collaboration between the U.S. and Russia, including collegial exchanges of personnel.
  - c) The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Russian Federation encouraged the SWG to evaluate modern technologies for polar bear research, and affirmed the importance of scientific studies.

## **ATTACHMENT 1**

### List of Attendees at the 5th Annual Meeting of the Scientific Working Group of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission

#### **Scientific Working Group members that attended the meeting**

##### American members

Eric Regehr (American cochair) – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Charles Brower (alternate member and proposed replacement for Jack Omelak) – Alaska Nanuuq Commission

Mike Pederson – North Slope Borough

Karyn Rode – U.S. Geological Survey

Kimberly Titus – Alaska Department of Fish and Game

Ryan Wilson (alternate member and proposed replacement for Scott Schliebe) – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

##### Russian members

Stanislav Belikov (Russian cochair) – All-Russian Research Institute of Nature Protection

Andrei Boltunov – All-Russian Research Institute of Nature Protection

Sergey Kavry (alternate member for Vladilen Kavry) – Representative of the indigenous people of the Chukotka Autonomous District

Anatoly Kochnev – Chukotka Federal Fisheries Research Institute

Nikita Platonov (alternate member for Ilia Mordvinstevev) – Russian Academy of Sciences

**Scientific Working Group members who were unable to attend the meeting**

American members

Todd Atwood – U.S. Geological Survey

Vacant (replacement member for currently vacant U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service polar bear project leader) –  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Russian members

Vladilen Kavry – Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North

Ilia MordvinsteV – Russian Academy of Sciences

Nikita Ovsyanikov – former employee of Wrangel Island Nature Reserve

Yury Tototto – Marine Hunters Union