Vice-Chair for Conservation Report for 2021

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During 2021, we wrote and submitted four letters to relevant decision-makers on a variety of issues associated with seabird conservation. Below are summaries of the four letters submitted in 2021, in chronological order from the most recent:

1. 10 December 2021: PSG submitted a letter to the California Coastal Commission in support of the US Fish and Wildlife Service revised proposal to eradicate invasive house mice from the Farallon Islands, California.
2. 3 December 2021: PSG submitted a letter to the Migratory Birds Division of the US Fish and Wildlife Service in support of the Service codifying its interpretation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act as prohibiting incidental take in commercial fisheries.
3. 11 November 2021: PSG submitted a letter to the Pacific Fishery Management Council to provide recommendations regarding the prohibition on a directed fishery for shortbelly rockfish in the final list of management measures in the Groundfish Fishery Management Plan Amendment.
4. 7 July 2021: PSG submitted a letter to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife urging the Fish and Wildlife Commission to vote to uplist the Marbled Murrelet to Endangered status in Oregon.

Unfortunately, several opportunities to prepare letters on relevant issues were missed due to short turnaround times between a request being submitted and the submission deadline.

In addition to preparing and submitting letters, the Conservation Committee participated in the following seabird conservation-related activities:

1. Peter Hodum, Vice-Chair for Conservation, worked with Dr. Doug Bertram, Environment and Climate Change Canada, to establish collaborations with the Environmental Law Centers (ELCs) at the University of Victoria, BC, and the University of California, Irvine to conduct a review of legal, regulatory and policy applications of incidental take of seabirds in Pacific salmon gillnet fisheries. This process began in late 2021 and is continuing in 2022, with law students at both ELCs working under the supervision of law school faculty members at both universities. The goal of this legal assessment is to determine how the concept of incidental take is applied in Pacific gillnet fisheries in both Canada and the US and if mitigation occurs for marine bird mortalities in gillnets.
2. Peter Hodum and Roberta Swift participated in the Marbled Murrelet Technical Committee Inland Survey Protocol meeting in May 2021 to provide PSG’s perspective on the importance of the protocol to PSG’s mission and to address questions about PSG’s position on the purpose of the protocol.

As part of the Conservation meeting at the virtual 2021 PSG Annual Meeting, we held a discussion focused on ways to improve the effectiveness and impact of the Conservation Committee (CC). What follows is a summary of some of the most prominent topics that were raised and discussed:

1. There was considerable interest in leveraging the expertise with PSG to broaden the effectiveness and impact of the Conservation Committee. A number of comments were shared about the impacts of letters from PSG on policy and conservation decision-making. Another comment mentioned that the impacts of some letters, although real, might be hard to track/difficult to see.
2. There was recognition of the fundamental importance of communication about seabird conservation issues. There are a number of platforms that could be used (e.g., Slack) that would allow for more dynamic and real-time communication about conservation issues. However, the effectiveness of a Slack channel depends on buy-in from the entire PSG community. Apparently, the Waterbird Society has a Slack channel that was developed for their 2020 meeting but has been kept active. These types of platforms are more flexible and dynamic than conventional listservs.

3. It was suggested that we develop strategies and capacity to become more proactive in engaging more directly with decision makers and stakeholders.

4. Peter Hodum and Kristin Brunk, the PSG Student Representative, met multiple times during 2021 to discuss ways to encourage more early career scientist (ECS) participation in the work of the Conservation Committee. While they recognized that graduate students and ECSs typically have limited discretionary time, contributing to the Conservation Committee could provide valuable professional experience for those interested.

5. It was suggested that regional representatives communicate with their regional members more regularly throughout the year, including reminders to share relevant conservation issues with the Conservation Committee.

6. In a comment repeated from the 2020 CC meeting, there was a recommendation that we elevate and make more visible the work that PSG members are doing in conservation, climate change science and sustainability.

7. The Vice-Chair for Conservation suggested that we solicit interest from members to form groups of experts on priority topics to help with letter writing and with tracking needs and opportunities.

Challenges

Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt many plans during 2021. My intention was to communicate more regularly on the PSG listserv to update the membership on submitted letters/comments and to request that priority conservation issues are shared with me. I also planned to follow up on the fifth point above in the meeting summary and solicit volunteers from the PSG membership to serve on topical expert groups, including, but not necessarily limited to, wind energy, fisheries bycatch, and policy. I did not accomplish either of those goals, but they remain high priorities for 2022.

Looking forward

1. Establish a calendar for regional representatives to send out quarterly emails to their regional membership with any relevant PSG news and with a reminder to submit relevant conservation issues to the Vice-Chair for Conservation.

2. The Vice-Chair for Conservation and the Student Representative (and interested ECSs) develop a strategy to create opportunities for student and ECS involvement in Conservation Committee activities.

3. Explore communication platforms, including Slack, that could improve the efficiency of communicating about relevant conservation issues in a timely manner.

4. Develop a strategy to improve the visibility of work that PSG members are doing in conservation, climate change science, and sustainability.