
Pacific Seabird Group



DEDICATED TO THE STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF PACIFIC SEABIRDS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

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Vice Chairman for Conservation
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April 14, 1993

Dr. David R. Gibbons
Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council
645 G Street
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Re: Endowment of University Chairs

Dear Dr. Gibbons:

As you know, from time to time the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) has suggested projects for the Trustee Council to consider in its restoration planning. In addition to our earlier suggestions, PSG supports the endowment of chairs in marine ornithology at the University of Alaska as an appropriate use of some of the Exxon Valdez settlement funds. This use is justified under the enhancement provisions in the settlement documents. PSG continues to support its earlier proposals, including the removal of introduced predators that have destroyed nesting seabird populations and the purchase of habitat.

Birds in the marine environment were impacted terribly by oil. In order to achieve the basic understanding that could lead to enhancement for marine birds, or even their survival through the "oil age," we need long term studies. While Alaska is home to some of the world's largest and most diverse seabird communities, the University of Alaska has not led the way in seabird research. Several government agencies have a mandate to ensure the welfare of seabirds, but funding for long-term research is ephemeral. During the 1970s and 1980s much of the seabird research conducted in anticipation of development of the outer continental shelf was done by researchers associated with universities from outside the state. Since that time, funding for seabird research has been uncertain and no attempt has been

made by the University of Alaska to develop a seabird research program that would develop the expertise necessary to investigate issues relating to seabirds and the development of the State's resources.

Endowed university chairs can provide continuing research, expertise for contract studies, public education and a source of well-trained scientists to advise or be employed by the responsible agencies. Endowed chairs are a form of insured economic diversity for local communities as well. We believe funding endowed academic chairs is a valid use of the oil spill settlement funds and may be one of the least controversial ways to use some of the trust funds.

PSG recommends that the Trustee Council endow the following chairs at the University of Alaska:

1. Chair for the Study of Seabird Breeding Biology.

The spill raised many questions concerning possible impacts of oil on breeding behavior. Many questions could not be answered due to insufficient information on the normal variation in breeding success. Seabirds have evolved a set of adaptations for breeding on land while exploiting marine food resources. An investigator with experience with one species or group can interpret related phenomena in the breeding adaptations of other seabirds. The establishment of a chair dedicated to the study of seabird breeding biology would allow the University of Alaska to develop long-term studies at many key breeding colonies. The University would also have the ability to respond to short-term research needs at colonies where studies are required either before development or after a perturbation. This chair should be located at the Institute of Arctic Biology in Fairbanks.

2. Chair for the Study of Seabird Foraging Ecology and Pelagic Distributions

Changes in prey resources are responsible for most annual variation in seabird breeding success and for variations in distribution and abundance at sea. Understanding how seabird populations fluctuate in relation to natural changes in prey populations is critical to understanding and assessing any changes that may come from human impacts in seabirds or prey populations. This chair would enable an ornithologist to work in conjunction with oceanographers and fisheries biologists to better understand long-term trends in the breeding populations of seabirds as well as interpret spatial and temporal variation in

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pelagic distributions. This chair should be established at the Institute of Marine Science in Fairbanks.

3. Chair for the Study of Shorebirds.

Oil spill damage to black oystercatchers is well documented. Isleib and Kessel (Birds of the North Gulf Coast - Prince William Sound Region, Alaska, 1973) list 32 species of shorebirds that migrate along these coasts of which nine nest and seven spend the winter. While few shorebirds were recovered after the oil spill, their habitat is severely damaged. These are birds of the entire coastline of the North and South Pacific and deserve major attention.

4. Chair for the Study of Marine-Oriented Waterfowl.

Continuing oil spill damage to harlequin ducks is well documented. Other species adversely involved include, scoters, goldeneyes, oldsquaw, bufflehead and mallard. Canada geese and swans use these coasts in winter and during migration. Steller's eiders and emperor geese winter in the western portion of the oil spill area and have declining populations for unknown reasons. These species are important to subsistence and recreational hunters in Alaska, Canada, the lower states and elsewhere.

5. Chair for the Study of Bald Eagle Ecology.

PSG endorses the proposal by the American Bald Eagle Foundation for a chair in Bald Eagle Ecology at the University of Alaska Southeast, an institution already oriented toward eagle studies.

PSG believes that other academic chairs should be considered, including intertidal ecology and fisheries science. Thank you very much for your consideration of these matters.

Sincerely,

Craig S. Hauer