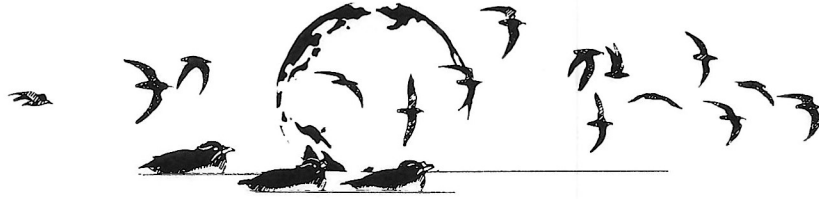

**Pacific
Seabird
Group**



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

George J. Divoky, Chairman
10535 Interlake North
Seattle, Washington 98133

March 8, 1993

Honorable Bruce Babbitt
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Re: Removal of Exotic Predators from Alaska's Seabird Colonies

Dear Secretary Babbitt:

On behalf of the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG), we are delighted to congratulate you on your confirmation as Secretary of the Interior. We wish you every success in the stewardship of this nation's biological resources.

PSG is an international organization that was founded in 1972 to promote knowledge, study and conservation of Pacific seabirds. Its members are drawn from the entire Pacific Basin, including Russia, Canada, Japan, China, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand. Among PSG's members are biologists who have research interests in Pacific seabirds, state and federal officials who manage seabird refuges, and individuals who are interested in marine conservation.

We write to draw your attention to the conservation of marine birds in Alaska. We urge that you direct the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) to restore the natural bio-diversity of the seabird colonies in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge by promoting an aggressive program to eliminate exotic rats, foxes and other creatures that have caused the local extinction of seabird colonies. Foxes that were abandoned by fox farmers depress the breeding population of seabirds on the Alaskan Maritime National Wildlife Refuge by several million each year. FWS should humanely end the suffering of the foxes that were deserted in this foreign and hostile environment and barely survive by depredating seabird colonies.

We recognize that public attention with respect to seabirds during recent years has been directed toward driftnet fishing and oil spills. These issues are certainly important to the conservation of Pacific seabirds. For example, FWS biologists estimate that the incidental catch of seabirds in the high seas driftnet fisheries in the North Pacific was 416,000 birds in 1990.^{1/} The natural resource trustees estimate that the Exxon Valdez disaster killed about 400,000 seabirds.^{2/} We must remember, however, that an oil spill wreaks most of its havoc on seabirds in a single year, but alien predators depress seabird populations year after year until they are removed.

Alaskan biologists recognized and began attempts to solve this problem in the 1940s. During the past several years, we unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Bush administration to take concrete steps to resolve this situation. Just last year we wrote to the FWS Regional Director in Alaska to protest the cancellation of a project to remove introduced predators from several refuge islands that had been scheduled for the 1992 field season. The funds to eliminate exotic foxes from seabird islands were reallocated (perhaps by order of the FWS Deputy Director in Washington DC) to a project that killed native foxes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. FWS' policy in regard to controlling fox populations in Alaska is not only wrong-headed, it makes our task of persuading the public to accept the removal of exotic creatures all the more difficult. Our concerns in this regard were also expressed to FWS by the Kachemak Bay Conservation Society in Homer, Alaska, and by David Cline, Alaska regional vice-president of the National Audubon Society.

There can be no doubt that exotic predators devastate seabird colonies. Foxes, rats or both occur on at least 59 islands in the Alaskan Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and depress the breeding population of seabirds in an amount equivalent to several Exxon Valdez oil spills each year. There is also little doubt that removal of alien predators from island ecosystems allows depleted seabird populations to recover. After Kaligagan Island, Alaska, was stocked with foxes in 1921, its seabird population plunged so low that the renowned naturalist Olaus Murie recommended that it continue as a fox farm. In the 1980s, after foxes had died out, FWS biologists found that Kaligagan had 125,000 burrowing seabirds. FWS biologists recently described dramatic increases in bird populations after foxes were removed from Nizki-Alaid Island, western Aleutians.

^{1/} Johnson, Shaffer and Gould. 1991. Incidental Catch of Marine Birds in High Seas Driftnets of the North Pacific. International North Pacific Fisheries Commission Symposium, Tokyo.

^{2/} 56 Fed. Reg. 14691 (1991).

We hope that you will direct FWS in Alaska to establish a long-term program with a goal of removing alien predators from all seabird colonies and former seabird colonies in Alaska by the year 2000. To accomplish this task cost-effectively, we need your support for the approval of the use of toxicants such as M-44's and 1080. These toxicants will be used only on remote islands where native species will not be affected. During recent years, two dedicated FWS biologists lost their lives in the Aleutians while attempting to remove predators because they were denied the use of the appropriate tools to do the job. We acknowledge that FWS field biologists and refuge managers have done an excellent, even heroic, job in removing predators from some breeding islands in Alaska. This work has proceeded with ad hoc, piece meal efforts without adequate support from FWS management. This project needs strong support and oversight from the Secretary's office to ensure that this work is accomplished.

We look forward to working with you to restore the natural bio-diversity to the seabird breeding islands in Alaska.

Sincerely,

George J. Divoky

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