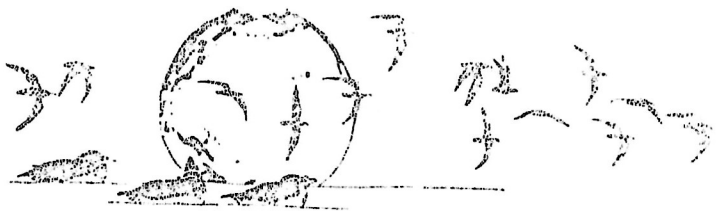
Pacific Seabird Group



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

March 28, 1978

Honorable Robert Leggett, Chairman
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife
Conservation and the Environment
1339 Longworth House Office Bldg.
Washington, D. C. 20515

Dear Mr. Leggett:

The Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) was formed in 1972 to foster better communication among Pacific seabird researchers. Among its members are professional scientists and amateur seabird enthusiasts from the United States, Canada, and 18 other nations. The PSG acts to coordinate and stimulate the field activities of its membership and to inform its members and the general public of conservation issues relating to Pacific seabirds and the marine environment.

We have followed with great interest efforts to protect critical wildlife habitats in Alaska and are in support of the establishment of new National Wildlife Refuges and National Parks through the d-2 lands legislation (see attached resolution). We understand that H.R. 39 will soon be considered by the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife Conservation and the Environment, and the purpose of this letter is to provide you with information regarding the establishment of offshore boundaries to coastal refuges and parks.

In the way of background, an offshore boundary has been part of several proposals pertaining to Alaska lands. Former Interior Secretary Morton proposed a seaward boundary of three miles (from mean high tide, subject to valid, existing rights) in his original d-2 recommendations. Mr. Dingell's proposed National Wildlife Refuge System Organic Act of 1975 (94th Congress: H.R. 1522) included offshore boundaries of one to five miles for new coastal refuges in Alaska. More recently, the late Senator Metcalf proposed seaward boundaries of six miles for all new refuges and parks in his Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act., S. 1500.

Three existing National Wildlife Refuges (Nunivak, Semidi, and Simeonof) and one National Monument (Glacier Bay) in Alaska presently have offshore boundaries. An additional 22 National Park System units outside Alaska have offshore boundaries. Thus, offshore boundaries would appear to be an established approach to protecting coastal resources.

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Senator Jackson

The ecological basis for offshore boundaries is straightforward. The waters adjacent to a coastal area are an integral part of the coastal ecosystem. Seabirds -- murres, puffins, kittiwakes, cormorants, and others -- are dependent on nearshore waters, especially by colonies, as places for feeding, rearing their young, staging and resting during migration, and, in some cases, wintering. Some waterfowl species (eiders, scoters, brant, etc.) also make extensive use of nearshore salt water, primarily during migration and in winter. The welfare of marine bird populations in general is linked to the quality of nearshore waters.

Pollution of coastal waters from, for example, oil rigs, potentially threatens seabirds directly through contact with oil, but also indirectly through reductions in the populations of food organisms (small fish and zoo-plankton). Of as much concern as pollution are disturbances at colony sites. Perhaps most vulnerable are the massive seabird colonies located on steep cliffs rising from the sea. Most of these seabirds have low reproductive rates, and while they are incubating eggs or rearing young -- perched precariously on narrow ledges -- they are extremely vulnerable to disturbance. A helicopter flight near a cliff-face colony, for example, may drive hundreds of thousands of birds from nests; in the panic, many eggs may be shoved out of nests and off the cliff.

Because of their low reproductive rates, losses due to disturbances or pollution could mean recovery rates of many years for some seabird populations.

It is impossible, of course, to include within a seaward boundary all the waters used by seabirds (even the 200 mile limit might in insufficient for these wide-ranging birds! ). A boundary at the six mile line appears to be justified. Research at Buldir Island in the western Aleutians showed that 54 percent of all seabirds occurred within 6 nautical miles of shore between May and September. Furthermore, a U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service "Progress Report on Seabird Surveys: Cape Lisburne to the Barren Islands (May 1975)" indicated that from 68 to 95 percent of the birds recorded on aerial surveys (generally perpendicular to shore) near colonies, during the same season, were within six miles of shore. These results underscore the importance of coastal waters during the breeding season.

While our interests focus on seabirds, it should be noted that many of our concerns are applicable to those marine mammals (e.g., Steller's Sea Lions, Sea Otters, and Harbor Seals) which also make extensive use of the coastal zone. Sea Otters, for example, virtually never leave coastal waters.

The critical importance of waters adjacent to coastal areas, particularly at seabird colony sites, suggests to us that sensitive management of nearshore waters is essential for the welfare of our marine birds and mammals. Offshore boundaries for new coastal refuges and parks in Alaska may be an appropriate mechanism for achieving this end.

Thank you for considering our views. We hope the information provided herein is of use in your consideration of any d-2 legislation. Please make the contents of this letter available to the members of your committee.

Sincerely,

Daniel W. Anderson

Daniel W. Anderson
Chairman

DWA:eo

Attachment

Copies to:

John Seiberling, Ohio
Lloyd Meeds, Washington
Morris K. Udall, Arizona
Don Young, Alaska
John D. Dingell, Michigan

Members of PSG Executive Council

RESOLUTION

The Pacific Seabird Group at its annual meeting in January, 1978, voted to advise the Congress of their support for establishment of National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska. We support the coastal seabird refuges as proposed by the Department of the Interior. Our concern and support is no less for the big Interior waterfowl refuges on the Yukon, Koyukuk, Innoko and Selawik Rivers, major sources of the loons, terns, grebes, shorebirds and songbirds as well as ducks that winter in the western states. Of particular concern is the maximum size refuge on the Yukon Flats where summer bird densities are greatest.

We urge the maximum size for proposed refuges in all these valleys. If economic conditions change or new discoveries of the future indicate Refuge status for these lands is no longer warranted, some future Congress can make that decision.

The Pacific Seabird Group is largely composed of professional people in the western coastal states although there is membership in more than 18 countries.

ATTACHMENT 1 - PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP RESOLUTION.