

Ringed and Bearded Seal Populations in Alaska Are Not Showing Signs of Decline

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The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) has been monitoring the health and status of ringed (*Phoca hispida*) and bearded (*Erignathus barbatus*) seals in Alaska since 1960 by collecting information and samples from the Alaska Native subsistence harvest. We examined how parameters that affect population size and status vary in time and how current conditions compare with past conditions. These data span five decades and include time periods well before changes in sea ice or other factors attributed to climate change were present. Compared to past decades, ringed seals have similar blubber thickness, but are growing faster, maturing younger, and have higher pregnancy rates. The proportion of pups in the harvest is also currently higher. For bearded seals, age at maturity has not changed, but blubber thickness and pregnancy rates are higher than in the past. The proportion of pups in the harvest is similar to that of the 1970s and twice as high as the 1960s. The number of pups in the harvest of both species indicates that pups are surviving beyond weaning, and responses to hunter questionnaires indicate that ringed and bearded seal numbers have not decreased. Stomach contents indicate that ringed and bearded seals currently consume more fish and fewer invertebrates than in the past. Taken as a whole, we found no evidence that ringed or bearded seal populations in Alaska are declining or that current conditions are more stressful than those in the past.

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