



Alaska SeaLife Center
w i n d o w s t o t h e s e a

KEEPING AN EYE ON THE STELLERS

The population of Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*) in southcentral and western Alaska has declined by about 80% since the mid-1970s and this “western stock” has recently been listed as an endangered species. Chiswell Island, 35 miles south of Seward, is home to a small rookery of these endangered sea lions. Remotely operated cameras have been operated on the island since October 1998. These cameras are owned and serviced by SeeMore Wildlife Systems, Inc. (SWS). The Alaska SeaLife Center (ASLC) leases and operates the cameras for the purposes of monitoring the behaviors and conducting censuses of Steller sea lions from the convenience of an office. Using a simple, desktop computer program, VHF signals are sent to the island telling the cameras how to move, focus, etc. while video and audio signals are sent back to the SeaLife Center via microwave. Presently, there are six cameras located on Chiswell Island with others on Seal Rocks, Natao (Grotto) Island, and a rookery near Prince William Sound.



Sea lion bulls begin returning to Chiswell Island during late April and early May each year to stake out breeding territories and wait for the females which arrive mid-May to early June. In recent years, approximately 60 females gave birth and mated with eight to ten bulls in late May through early July. Like other otariids (eared seals), female Steller sea lions will leave their pups onshore while foraging at sea. While most females depart from the island with their pups by late August, some continue to nurse their pups at Chiswell through October. Pups with their moms arriving at Chiswell Island from distant rookeries as early as September 25th have been recorded.



During the 2001 breeding season, the ASLC began conducting detailed observations of lactating female Steller sea lions and their pups using the SWS cameras. Observations focus on the Chiswell Island population as a whole looking at long-term trends of maternal investment in sea lions that give birth and breed on the island. Specifically, data is collected on the timing of parturition (birth) and mating, length of perinatal periods (the time between birthing and the mother’s first feeding trip to sea), maternal attendance patterns (time the female spends on shore as opposed to out at sea feeding), time spent suckling, and activity budgets of both mothers and pups. These parameters will provide a good idea of the general health of Chiswell Island Steller sea lions, hint at prey availability, and provide critical baseline data for this rookery. In 2002, this study expanded to include comparisons with prey abundances in the immediate area.

This project is currently funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service. For more information, please contact: John Maniscalco, Research Associate at john_maniscalco@alaskasealife.org, (907) 224-6378, or the Alaska SeaLife Center, P.O. Box 1329, Seward, AK 99664.