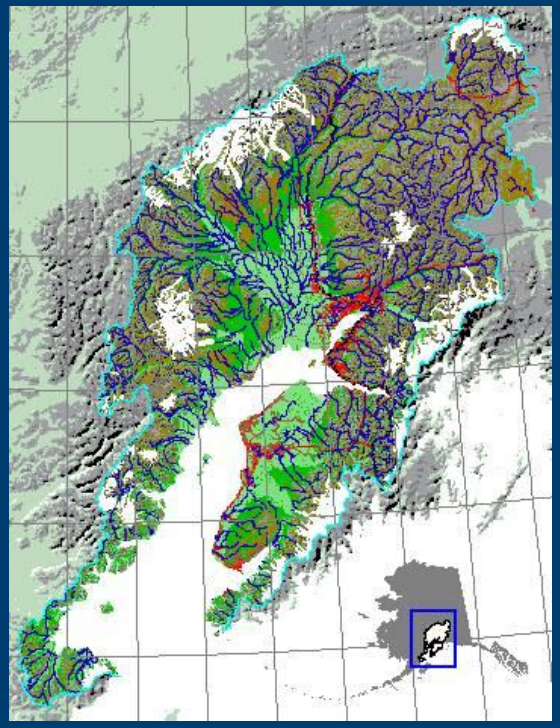
Science, Service, Stewardship

Cook Inlet Habitat Conservation Strategy



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What is the Cook Inlet Habitat Conservation Strategy?

- It's a new effort to tie together all of NOAA Fisheries' habitat-related science and management activities and work with partners to maintain healthy habitat conditions for marine life in Cook Inlet.
- NOAA Fisheries is implementing a national "Habitat Blueprint" to focus more attention on the importance of healthy habitats to support sustainable fisheries, protected species, and coastal economies. The Cook Inlet strategy is one of seven regional initiatives nationwide to sustain or improve habitat conditions within defined geographic areas.

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Why Cook Inlet?

- Ecologically important area that supports a diverse array of fish and marine mammals, including an endangered population of beluga whales
- Watershed includes nearly 2/3 of Alaska's population
- Inlet includes state's largest port, oil and gas development, and commercial, recreational, and subsistence fishing
- Its habitats are relatively healthy and intact, yet face mounting pressure: port expansion, new bridge, large mine development, hydrokinetic energy generation, water quality effects from urban areas, etc.

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Why Cook Inlet?

Selection criteria for Alaska's regional initiative:

1. Has a link to fisheries and/or protected resources
2. Addresses a larger issue (not tied to a development project)
3. Fairly high profile
4. Has good opportunities for partnerships
5. Involves real habitat threats
6. Has good prospects for delivering concrete results
7. Involves habitat protection/restoration as well as science about habitat conditions, functions, etc.
8. Logistically practicable, especially for science/research

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Cook Inlet Resources of Concern for NOAA Fisheries

- Marine fish (pollock, rock sole, Pacific cod, halibut, Pacific herring, skate, shellfish, and prey species such as saffron cod, smelt, sculpin, eulachon, stickleback)
- Anadromous fish (sockeye, Chinook, coho, pink, chum)
- Marine mammals (beluga whales, killer whales, Steller sea lions, harbor seals)
- Commercial, recreational, and subsistence harvests
- Habitats needed to sustain all of the above…

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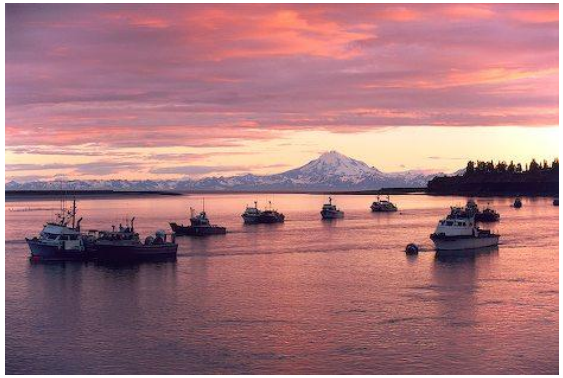
Cook Inlet Resources: Commercial Fisheries

- Fisheries: federal and state managed harvests such as salmon drift gillnet, pot cod fishing, and halibut longlining
- NOAA Fisheries has identified Essential Fish Habitat in Cook Inlet for walleye pollock, rock sole, Pacific cod, skate, weathervane scallop, Pacific salmon, and sculpin.



Kenai River, Alaska-in-Pictures.com

Herring sac roe seine fishery in Kamishak Bay, ADF&G

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Cook Inlet Resources: Subsistence / Personal Use Fisheries

- Cook Inlet supports a variety of subsistence or personal use fisheries: salmon, halibut, herring, bottomfish, shellfish

Diamond Cape Charters

ADF&G

Kasilof River, ADF&G

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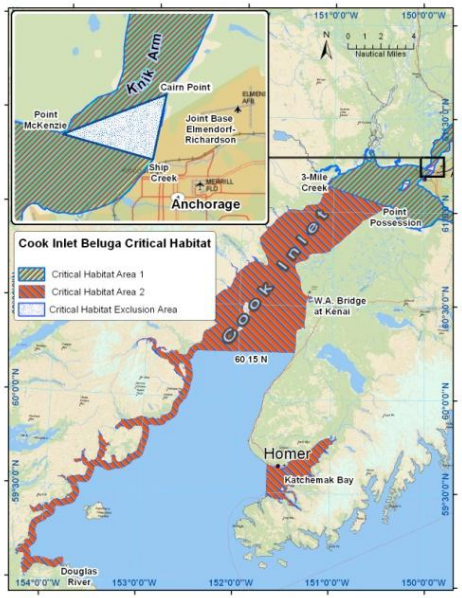
Cook Inlet Resources: Beluga Whales

- Cook Inlet beluga whales are listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act.
- The 2010 population estimate was 340 animals.
- NOAA Fisheries designated Critical Habitat for the whales in April 2011 and is developing a Recovery Plan.



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The Challenge

How can NOAA Fisheries best respond and work with others to conserve Cook Inlet habitats?

- ✓ NOAA Fisheries will collaborate with partners to improve the understanding and management of Cook Inlet's marine habitats in the context of continued economic development and sustainable use of marine resources.

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Expected Results

- NOAA Fisheries will deliver a more cohesive and effective suite of products and services to promote long term habitat conservation, adding value to related work by other agencies and the private sector.
- *VISION*: Resource managers and stakeholders will have better information to ensure that habitats in Cook Inlet remain productive in perpetuity.
- *RESULTS*: NOAA Fisheries will work with partners to help identify conservation priorities and maintain healthy habitat conditions for marine life, striving for no net decrease in habitat functions.

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Components of the Strategy: Science

- Improve scientific understanding of Cook Inlet marine resources and habitat conditions through expanded biological surveys by the Alaska Fisheries Science Center and partners.
- Develop a predictive model to link habitat attributes to fish species or assemblages.
- Identify habitat areas and functions of greatest concern for supporting fish and marine mammals.

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Components of the Strategy: Management

- Provide better coordinated consultative services to regulatory agencies and developers under the Endangered Species Act and Magnuson-Stevens Act.
- Ensure that oil spill response and restoration planning fully account for habitats of concern.
- Develop a marine invasive species monitoring program.
- Work with existing watershed groups and partnerships to support habitat conservation for Cook Inlet and investigate possible new private sector partnerships.

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Collaboration is the Key!

- Success of this new strategy depends upon working effectively with partners.
- NOAA Fisheries has very good working relationships with other entities that are actively involved in issues affecting Cook Inlet – state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, fishing industry groups, Alaska Native tribes, Alaska Ocean Observing System, NOAA Kasitsna Bay Lab, University of Alaska, and others.
- One of the first steps is to begin outreach to explain the Cook Inlet Habitat Conservation Strategy, solicit support, and identify ways NOAA Fisheries can best work with partners to implement the strategy.

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Cook Inlet Collaboration

- ✓ How can NOAA Fisheries work with partners to pursue habitat-related projects of mutual interest?
- ✓ How might NOAA Fisheries be able to support other groups' habitat-related activities and advance common goals like filling data gaps?
- ✓ How can NOAA Fisheries assist others with habitat-related expertise, capabilities, or information?

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In Summary…

- The Cook Inlet Habitat Conservation Strategy is a new effort to tie together all of NOAA Fisheries' habitat-related science and management activities and work with partners to meet a common objective: maintaining healthy habitat conditions in an important geographic region.
- Our goal is to more effectively promote long term habitat conservation by integrating and building upon NOAA's existing work in Cook Inlet and increasing collaboration with others. We will share scientific information to help identify conservation priorities and maintain healthy habitats for marine life.

Questions?