

# Seals/fisheries workshop fosters common ground

Last October, a diverse group of over 60 commercial and recreational fishermen, scientists, and resource managers gathered at the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (PCCS) to discuss interactions between seals and fisheries.

These range from depredation, during which seals remove or damage catch from fishing gear, to ecosystem-scale competition, when seals and fisheries target the same species. Such interactions have been raising concerns among people in the fishing community as the number of seals in New England waters has been increasing over the past few decades.

Accounts of depredation have gone up in frequency and geographic range in recent years, and scientists and fishermen alike have begun to pose questions about the ecosystem-level effects of growing local seal abundance.

The Oct. 28 workshop was titled "Gulf of Maine Seals: Fisheries Interactions and Integrated Research" and was sponsored by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) Marine Mammal Center. It was organized by researchers from PCCS, WHOI, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Connecticut, and the University of New England.

The workshop followed a series of informal meetings between PCCS staff

## GUEST COLUMN

by Owen Nichols

and members of the Cape Cod fishing community, during which scientists met with commercial and recreational fishermen at ports, community centers, and association meetings.

These meetings laid the foundation for the workshop by building a relationship between local fishing and scientific communities and highlighting areas of common interest for future collaborative studies. While the workshop was regional in scope, fishermen and scientists in attendance hailed from as far away as Nova Scotia and British Columbia.

In order to ensure that the fishing community had a distinct voice in these discussions, the October workshop included a forum where fishermen were encouraged to share their observations, experiences, and concerns.

Separately, moderated discussion groups composed of all participants focused specifically on fisheries interactions, seal tagging and tracking projects, and management issues.

The recommendations from all four sessions shared common themes, which included the need for collaborative research involving both the scientific and fishing communities.



Owen Nichols/PCCS photo

A seal outside of a net.

Participants identified that there were data gaps concerning seal abundance estimates, movements, and diet. They also proposed several research projects, including studies of seal depredation in recreational and commercial fisheries, tagging and tracking seals to gauge their movement and overlap with fisheries, and ecosystem-scale analyses of the potential for competition.

Proposals by workshop organizers to create a database to share data among collaborators and development of a consortium to foster collaboration among managers, researchers, and

the fishing community were well received.

Since the workshop, planning has begun for several collaborative projects involving workshop participants. It is the sincere hope of the organizers that the lively exchanges and communication begun at the workshop will lead to further collaboration and understanding among all stakeholders as they move forward to tackle the dynamic and complex issue of seal/fisheries interactions.

A report from the workshop will be available on the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution website at <[www.whoi.edu](http://www.whoi.edu)> in the near future. ■

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*He co-organized the "Gulf of Maine Seals: Fisheries Interactions and Integrated Research" workshop with Andrea Bogomolni of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) and University of Connecticut, Lisa Sette of PCCS, Greg Early of WHOI, Keith Matassa of the University of New England, and Stephanie Wood Lafond.*

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