

Alaska's International Affairs Program

Alaska's geographic location between Russia and Canada places it in a center of international ecological importance with its shared borders, seas, and populations of many different species of flora and fauna. It is the primary northern staging area for birds following the great North American flyway—the avian migratory highway linking the Arctic and Latin America. Economically important fish populations and marine mammals move among Russian, Canadian, and U.S. regions. The significance of international conservation is rapidly growing throughout the world as countries recognize the mutual need to conserve shared natural resources, habitats, and indigenous cultures. For Alaska, international conservation requires coordination among the United States, Russia, Canada, Mexico, Japan, and other foreign countries as well as cooperative working relationships with the State of Alaska and the Native community.

Because of the growing need to increase coordination on an international level for the conservation of arctic habitats, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) Alaska Regional Office established its own Office of International Affairs (IA) in January 1998. The mission of the IA program is to strengthen cooperation, promote communication, and provide leadership in Alaska for international conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants. The IA Office manages, advocates, and executes priority international issues and programs, and coordinates regional activities. In addition, IA works with State and Federal scientists and managers, universities, non-governmental organizations, and indigenous peoples'

organizations to promote cooperative international conservation efforts.

Current IA efforts focus on several specific functions. A top priority is to coordinate FWS involvement in the work of the international Arctic Council, especially through its Working Group for the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna. International collaboration of this sort serves to strengthen collective scientific understanding of arctic ecosystems. Programs for joint management of shared resources are developing through international treaties and agreements such as the U.S.-Russia Conservation Agreement for Polar Bears of the Chukchi/Bering Sea Region. Another focus of the IA Office is to provide opportunities for technology transfer and technical assistance.

The ability of the FWS to succeed in using an ecosystem approach to resource management rests greatly on our ability to develop effective working relationships with our international and indigenous partners. A short list of Regional Office contributions to international conservation includes:

- serving as the National Representative to the Arctic Council's international working group on the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna,
- Bilateral U.S.—Russia Conservation Agreement for Polar bears of the Chukchi/Bering Sea Region,
- Circumpolar Murre Conservation Strategy,
- Circumpolar Spectacled Eider Conservation Strategy,
- Atlas of Rare Endemic Vascular Plants of the Arctic, and
- participating in wildlife management with Far Eastern Russia.