

Killer Whale Predation on Northern Fur Seals – Activity is Increasing?

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In recent years, mammal-eating killer whales have attracted a particular interest. It is supposed that killer whales, as an apex predator of the marine trophic pyramid, may significantly influence the numbers of marine mammals. Observations on mammal-eating killer whales were held on the southern end of Medniy Island, Commander I. during the summer periods of 2000-2007 where are located the northern fur seals and Steller sea lions rookery. For the years 2000 and 2003-2006, first encounters took place from June 14 until July 12. In 2007 the first encounters took place May 30. The last time in the season the whales were encountered was from July 15 until August 7. Killer whales were observed hunting on northern fur seals 1 day in 2000, 1 day in 2003, 3 days in 2004, 9 days in 2005, and 10 days in 2006. In 2007 we was observed 4 hunting days, but approximately all summer was stormy and foggy with poor observed conditions. Only one attack of killer whales on fur seals was recorded in 2000, but in 2006, 16 attacks were observed. 8 predation cases were observed in 2007. The number of attacks varied by day and on average 2.0 attacks on adults and subadults males fur seals were observed per day. The majority of the attacks on fur seals were observed near Yuzhny Cape on the border of the kelp. In 2000, two adult males killer whales were observed hunting and between 4-7 individuals in 2003-07. In 2003-2007 was registered one group which includes same individuals. One more group of mammal-eating killer whales was observed in 2006. The number of attacks near the southern end of Medniy Island has noticeably increased over the last 6 years. Before 2000 no observed attacks killer whales on fur seals throughout all historical period of observations on Medniy I. It is interesting to note that with the exception of only one short attack on Dall's porpoises (*Phocoenoides dalli*) killer whales paid absolutely no attention to other species of pinnipeds or sea otters, which are also abundant. It is possible that the observed group killer whales acute specialize in preying on northern fur seals.