



Summer 2003

# DISPATCH

Alaska  
Conservation  
Foundation

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## Saving Alaska's Old-Growth Coral

Contrary to popular belief, fishing is Alaska's top job-producing industry—not oil production. Each year, over \$1 billion is infused into the Alaskan economy by commercial fishing and fish processing. Moreover, fishing provides valuable food for subsistence cultures and is an important draw for sport fishers to the state. Fisheries are important not only to Alaska, but to the entire U.S.—a full 50 percent of seafood consumed in America is produced in Alaska's waters.

Not only are Alaska's waters home to fish, but also to many other remarkable animals. In July 2002, scientists discovered deep-sea coral reefs in Alaska waters off the Aleutian Islands. These vibrant, colorful reefs contain over one hundred species of coral and sponge, and are comparable in size, structure, and biodiversity to tropical coral reefs. Cold water coral and sponges survive in much deeper and colder water; they are arranged more like a garden across the sea floor, than a traditional reef wall.

### Bottom Trawling Threats

Alaskan commercial fisheries are concentrated in three regions—the Aleutian Islands, the Bering Sea, and the Gulf of Alaska. Bottom trawling takes place in all areas (see Sea Speak for definitions on page 4). Some areas are trawled more frequently than every year.

Bottom trawl fishing technology is not new, but its range has been extended by bigger boat engines and winches. The addition of rockhoppers, wheels, and rollers now allow the use of trawl fishing gear even on irregular and rocky bottoms. The two most apparent problems with bottom trawling are habitat impacts and

bycatch. Not surprisingly, studies in the Bering Sea have shown that species that provide habitat on the seafloor are more common and diverse in untrawled areas than those trawled frequently.

“There is so much at stake,” observes Mark Spalding, Alaska Conservation Foundation's Senior Program Officer for Oceans. “It is critical that we protect Alaska's marine ecosystems for present and future generations. Extensive bottom trawling represents a serious threat to these resources and to the fishers who rely on them.”

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*Yes, gone are the foreign factory trawlers that provided the impetus for Congress to pass the original Magnuson Act. But in their place is a U.S. fishing fleet—complete with its own factory trawlers—with the capacity to far out-fish the combined domestic and foreign fishing fleets of the 1970s.*

- from *Horrors of the Deep! The Marine Fish Conservation Network's 2003 report on the mismanagement of America's ocean resources.*  
For more information, look up [www.conservefish.org](http://www.conservefish.org)

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### Fishing Impacts on Alaskan Seafloor Habitat

At present, commercial fishing removes and discards over one million pounds of coral and sponge from the North Pacific seafloor every year—over 97 percent of this loss is caused by bottom trawling. With many corals taking hundreds of years to reach maturity, the large-scale loss is devastating to these ecosystems.

Trawling is less widespread in the Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska. Nevertheless, scientific evidence points to habitat damage from fishing in these regions. In the Gulf of Alaska, studies of trawl passes indicate they have high potential to damage and remove corals and sponges.

Without adequate protections for ocean ecosystems, bottom trawling could threaten these remarkable habitats, which could take decades or centuries to recover after being damaged. In fact, research shows that soft corals in certain parts of this region have all but disappeared as bycatch, most likely due to depletion because fishing gear regulations have not changed.

### A Drag Across the Bottom

According to the Alaska Ocean Network's Science Advisor, Dr. Josh Nowlis, “extensive evidence from around the globe shows



Bubblegum coral off the Aleutian Islands

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*Continued on next page*

## —Our Mission—

*Alaska Conservation Foundation works to protect the integrity of Alaska's intact ecosystems and to promote sustainable livelihoods among Alaska's communities and peoples.*

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## Saving Alaska's Old-Growth Coral continued from page 1

that bottom trawling reduces the complexity of the living seafloor habitats and changes the composition of species existing in the fished area. There is a real possibility that these changes will threaten the survival of ecosystems and of the fish species being pursued by bottom trawls.”

“It is not just bottom trawl gear we are concerned with,” added Nowlis, “all types of trawling gear that contact the seafloor should also be considered when protecting ocean habitats, including pollock pelagic trawls which, according to National Marine Fisheries Service estimates, may spend as much as 50 to 70 percent of the time on the seafloor.” It should be noted that this is true even though bottom trawl gear was prohibited in the pollock fishery in 1999.

A recent study by the National Research Council concluded: “bottom trawling has the potential to cause widespread impacts on ocean ecosystems through the disturbance of habitats living on the seafloor and removal of commercially desirable and other, unintended, species.”

Parts of the ocean have a hard bottom, but most have a soft sediment type bottom. In hard bottom areas, creatures attach themselves to, or seek protection among cobble, boulder fields and rock platforms. Trawl gear with wheels, rockhoppers, and rollers crush such creatures directly, or by toppling boulders and breaking rocks. In the soft sediment type habitats, many creatures provide their own structure, such as corals and shellfish. These animals are immobile, and are thus lost to the plough-like forces of a standard trawl apparatus. The furrows ploughed by bottom trawls can be many feet wide and as much as a foot deep. This means that even burrowing-fauna have no escape.

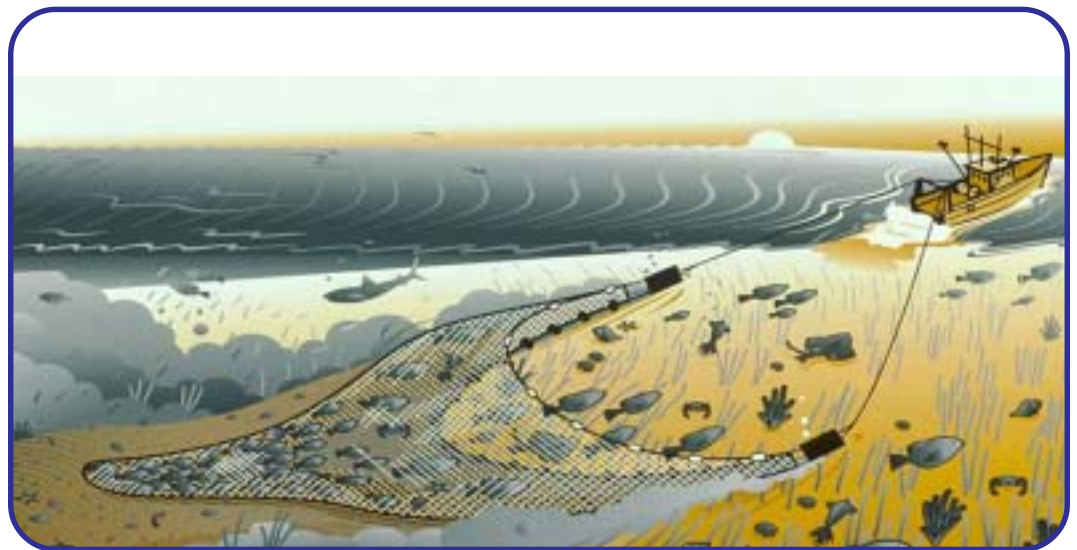
Add to this the large volume of sea life collected in the huge nets, and it is evident that this is an extremely indiscriminate fishery that catches many more creatures than the targeted fish. For example, according to a federally funded study of the 250-vessel West Coast trawl fleet fishing off Washington, Oregon and California, fishermen discard 44 percent of their catch overboard. Over 4 million pounds of fish and other sea life is wasted annually on the West coast alone.

Alaska's trawl fisheries are just as indiscriminate in catching non-target sea life, but the industry grinds up the animals that were unintentionally killed to produce fish meal for poultry farms. According to the Marine Fish Conservation Network, over the last five years, 370 million pounds of yellowfin sole and rock sole were discarded dead or dying in the North Pacific and an average of 74 million pounds (of just these two species) are still discarded annually in Alaska's bottom trawl fisheries—representing some of the highest bycatch rates in any region's groundfish fisheries.

## Special thanks to:

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation  
Surdna Foundation, Inc.  
George H. & Jane A. Mifflin Memorial Fund  
Oak Foundation  
444 S Foundation  
S B Foundation  
The San Diego Foundation

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“As a result of the past record of bottom trawling elsewhere in the world, we are extremely concerned that it could play a leading role in the significant decline of our Alaska fisheries, with devastating results for our economy and ecosystems,” cautions Deborah L. Williams, Executive Director of Alaska Conservation Foundation.

### **Bottom Trawling: Successful Bans**

Concern about the effects of trawling dates back at least to the 14th century. Regulations were enacted to limit bottom trawling as early as the 18th century. Bottom trawling yields fast profits, but is unsustainable precisely because of its long-term impact on habitat, and its voluminous catch. In other words, a conflict is created between short-term and long-term gains.

Eight countries have imposed a trawl ban of some kind. Three of the countries (New Zealand, Indonesia, and the Philippines) banned trawl fishing after conflicts arose between commercial and small-scale artisanal fishers. Locals recognized that it was nearly impossible for them to catch a reasonable quantity of fish with commercial trawlers operating nearby, so governments moved to restrict trawling in waters used by local

fishers. The other five countries (Scotland, Italy [Sicily only], Kenya, Seychelles and Greece) have banned trawling in order to restrict destructive fishing practices in specific areas or throughout their entire marine territory.

Studies have been conducted on the environmental effects of trawl bans in two countries, Indonesia and around Sicily in Italy. In both cases it was found that pressure on fish stocks had been alleviated and stock recovery had taken place. This, in turn, provided opportunities for increased catches by artisanal fishers through the use of small-scale fishing gear.

Similarly, Alaska banned bottom trawling in its waters in the Southeast portion of the state in 1989. The results have been remarkably similar to those in Indonesia and Sicily. Pressure on fish stocks has been reduced—recovery of fish and crab in the region is evident. Perhaps more importantly, Alaska’s small scale, local fishers are seeing a recovery of their livelihood.

### **Restricting Bottom Trawling: Next Steps**

An effort is now being made by Alaska Conservation Foundation’s Alaska Oceans Program (AOP), working with Alaska Oceans Network (AON) members, to extend the Southeast regional ban on bottom trawling to the Aleutian Islands Archipelago. The Aleutian Islands ecosystem is one of the most vibrant, dynamic ocean environments in the world. With over 450 species of fish, millions of seabirds, and 25 species of marine mammals, this rich and unique sea world is an international treasure. It is also an economic gold mine. However, indiscriminant bottom fishing practices in delicate seafloor habitat like coral and sponge gardens are irreversibly marring this pristine environment.

“AMCC, The Ocean Conservancy, Oceana, and the Alaska Oceans Program are leading the effort to educate and inform the public, press, and policymakers about the urgency to preserve and protect this delicate sea environment to prevent the devastating collapse of the ecosystem and local economy from indiscriminant, destructive fishing practices,” states Shelley Johnson, Alaska Oceans Network Program Coordinator.

The effort to reduce bottom trawling began in Fall 2002 with a proposal to extend the Alaska State ban on bottom trawling to include the state waters in the Aleutian Archipelago. The proposal would prohibit destructive bottom trawling on coral, sponge and other sensitive habitats, and would support a marine protected areas (MPAs) process in the Aleutians. AMCC, The Ocean Conservancy, and Oceana took the lead role in this effort to influence the Alaska State Board of Fish, and to lay the groundwork for parallel action within the federal North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. This regulatory process will result in the possible adoption of management measures restricting bottom trawling by 2004.

At the federal level, organizers are urging the North Pacific Fishery Management Council to amend the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Fishery Management Plan to protect coral and sponge in the Aleutians. A change in policy would act as a catalyst toward management based on the health of the ocean. Fortunately, the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council has identified the recently documented Gorgonian coral colonies off Alaska as “essential fish habitat,” which triggers the requirements of the U.S. Sustainable Fisheries Act for their protection.

## *AOP at Work ...*

With coordination and funding from Alaska Oceans Program (a program of ACF), AMCC, The Ocean Conservancy, and Oceana are working to protect essential fish habitat (EFH) at the federal regional fisheries council level. They have successfully advocated to add two new alternatives to a process designed to protect EFH from the negative effects of over fishing.

- ◆ One alternative addresses coral and sponge habitat in the Bering Sea. It focuses on creating areas with a high ratio of coral and sponge bycatch to fish catch (using government data) that would be closed to bottom trawling. It is anticipated that the ban would come at a small cost to the fishing industry. Additional protections are afforded through a bycatch cap that would end fishing for the year if coral and sponge bycatch exceeded certain annual levels.
- ◆ A second alternative identifies 20 percent of existing fishing grounds to be closed to all forms of bottom fishing. This alternative is based on over 3,000 public comments solicited by The Ocean Conservancy in support of a network of fully protected marine reserves.

Through efforts of ACF’s Alaska Oceans Program grantees, including Oceana, The Ocean Conservancy, and AMCC, both of these alternatives have been retained, despite intense lobbying pressure by industry groups.



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**Untrawled sea floor bottom alive with corals and sponges**



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**Bottom trawled sea floor**

In addition to the direct advancement of these issues before the Alaska State Board of Fish and Federal Fisheries Management Council, Alaska Oceans Network member World Wildlife Fund has been engaging in discussions with bottom trawl industry representatives and community representatives in the Pribilof Islands with the goal of a negotiated solution to reducing bottom trawling. Furthermore, AMCC and the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, with help from AOP, are conducting outreach efforts in the Eastern Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands with a small team of longline vessel owners to build understanding of rockfish problems and develop solutions. AMCC is also about to begin an outreach project regarding bottom trawling on Kodiak Island. Finally, Oceana and The Ocean Conservancy are jointly pursuing a comprehensive public awareness campaign about conserving the coral gardens of the Aleutian Islands.

"In sum, the organizations working on this issue have already succeeded in dramatically expanding the scope of new regulations under consideration to protect habitat from bottom trawling and other forms of fishing that damage the ecosystems on which our fisheries depend. This has set the stage for future efforts to adopt conservation-oriented regulations to protect habitat in the North Pacific," concludes Deborah Williams.

*by Mark J. Spalding  
Senior Program Officer  
Alaska Oceans Program*

# Sea Speak: a glossary of marine terms

**Bottom trawling:** a type of industrial fishing method that uses a variety of net devices that intentionally or unintentionally make contact with the ocean floor, often causing habitat destruction. In the North Pacific, these are primarily otter trawls whose trawl doors are designed to drag along the seafloor. The footropes are fixed with rolling discs, metal or rubber bobbins that bounce over obstacles.

**Bycatch:** the portion of a fishing catch that is discarded as unwanted or commercially unusable.

**Essential fish habitat (EFH):** Congress defined essential fish habitat for federally managed fish species as "those waters and substrate necessary for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity." The conservation of essential fish habitat is an important component of building and maintaining sustainable fisheries.

**Marine Protected Area (MPA):** Presidential Executive Order 13158 defines marine protected areas (MPAs) as "any area of the marine environment that has been reserved by Federal, State, territorial, tribal, or local laws or regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein." There are many different types of MPAs in U.S. waters.

**North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC):** one of eight regional councils established by the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976 (which has been renamed the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act) to oversee management of the nation's fisheries. With jurisdiction over the 900,000 square mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off Alaska, the Council has primary responsibility for groundfish management in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands, including cod, pollock, flatfish, mackerel, sablefish, and rockfish species harvested mainly by trawlers, hook and line longliners and pot fishermen.



## ACF Grants in Marine Issues

Recently, ACF and its programs granted funds to the following organizations to support their work on marine conservation and fisheries issues:

**Alaska Center for the Environment** \$32,450

Toward building a constituency for marine conservation

**Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association** \$10,000

Support for the Association's participation in the Steller Sea Lion Recovery Team and North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Essential Fish Habitat Committee

**Alaska Marine Conservation Council** \$25,000

To collaborate with Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association on rockfish conservation efforts

**Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation** \$10,000

Toward developing a long-term strategy for stabilizing the economies of Bristol Bay's fishing communities

**Oceana and The Ocean Conservancy** \$55,583

To promote Aleutian Islands coral gardens public awareness campaign

**Rural Alaska Community Action Program** \$1,000

For the Alaska Native Fish, Wildlife, Habitat, and Environment Summit

## ACF Tackles Global Warming through Education and Action

More than 100 people participated in Alaska Conservation Foundation's May 14 forum in Washington, DC, on *Global Warming in Alaska*. Over the course of the day, speakers detailed the dramatic adverse effects that global warming is having on Alaska's environment, fish, wildlife, communities, and infrastructure. For example:

- ◆ Since 1985, peak summer temperatures in the Yukon River have risen 10 degrees (C), enabling a parasite to decimate local Chinook salmon.
- ◆ Alaskan coastal villages are crumbling into the ocean and Alaska Natives are facing new dangers in pursuing their subsistence way of life.

Speakers also described current state and local initiatives that will curb carbon emissions. ACF's Chris Rose presented current efforts to harness Alaska's wind to make use of Alaska's almost limitless wind resources and the potential for producing hydrogen for fuel cells. ACF is also building national support for S139, the Climate Stewardship Act, sponsored by Senators McCain and Lieberman.

The audience included members of the press, scientists, funders, donors, non-governmental organizations and Congressional staffers. A group of ACF's partners served as co-hosts: Alaska Wilderness League, Center for International Environmental Law, Defenders of Wildlife, National Parks Conservation Association, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council, Union of Concerned Scientists, U.S. Public Interest Research Group and The Wilderness Society. Funding was generously provided by Deer Creek Foundation, the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, Oak Foundation and a private donor.

ACF will be posting a transcript of the proceedings. See [www.akcf.org](http://www.akcf.org).

## ACF's 2002 ANNUAL REPORT

ACF has released its 2002 Annual Report detailing accomplishments during fiscal year 2002. You can view the report on our website at [www.akcf.org](http://www.akcf.org).

ACF extends its gratitude to the generous artists who made their work available for the annual report:

**Photography:**

Chad Case  
Ken Graham  
Kim Heacox  
M. Nieman  
Steven Nourse  
Hugh Rose  
Tom Walker  
Mark Yezbick

[AccentAlaska.com](http://AccentAlaska.com)

Subhankar Banerjee  
[www.wwbphoto.com](http://www.wwbphoto.com)

Dorothy Keeler  
Leo Keeler

[www.akwildlife.com](http://www.akwildlife.com)

Robert Glenn Ketchum

[www.robertglennketchum.com](http://www.robertglennketchum.com)

Marge Larson  
Clark Mischler  
Larry Richlie

**Lyrics:**

Brad Stevens  
Stacy Studebaker



# Alaska Fund for the Future

Alaska Fund for the Future (AFF), a donor-advised fund of ACF, announced grants made during the 2003 cycle. AFF promotes awareness and understanding of Alaska and supports preservation of Alaska's environment, diverse human cultures, and sustainable economies.

<b>Alaska Marine Conservation Council</b> Conservation Internship for Margot Stiles	\$4,600	<b>Earthjustice</b> For the Juneau, Alaska, regional office's North Pacific marine biodiversity program	\$10,000
<b>Alaska Youth for Environmental Action</b> AYEA rural outreach	\$10,000	<b>Native American Fish and Wildlife Society</b> Collection of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Training: a tool for monitoring the environment	\$5,000
<b>Chevak Native Village</b> <i>Caretakers of Nature</i>	\$5,000	<b>Sitka Community Schools</b> Conservation of indigenous plants	\$2,610
<b>Cook Inlet Keeper</b> <i>Stop Toxic Oil Pollution in Cook Inlet Campaign</i>	\$10,000	<b>Sitka Conservation Society</b> For riparian/wetlands advocacy in Southeast Alaska	\$10,000
<b>Cook Inlet Keeper</b> Conservation Internship for Heather Sirotnak	\$4,600	<b>Southeast Alaska Conservation Council</b> Conservation Internship for Sarah Lemagie	\$4,600
<b>Copper River Watershed Project</b> Salmon solid composting in Cordova: reducing waste streams, increasing revenue streams	\$5,000		

Robert Glenn Ketchum's  
**ARCTIC Photographic Exhibition**,  
sponsored in part by  
**Alaska Conservation Foundation**,  
will be at the Alutiiq Museum &  
Archaeological Repository in Kodiak from  
April 30 through September 27, 2003.  
For more information about the show,  
call Alutiiq Museum at (907) 486-7004.

ACF thanks Anchorage-based designer  
Charles Lindemuth for his help in designing  
the ARCTIC exhibit poster.



## Great Land Giving Club

Do you find it difficult to support **Alaska Conservation Foundation** at the level you'd like to?

ACF recently announced a convenient way for donors to give to ACF. By joining the **Great Land Giving Club**, donors can make donations of any size through their credit card on a monthly basis. By making a monthly withdrawal from your credit card, you can support ACF during the year, minimizing the need to write a check. We do all the work—you just tell us how much to charge to your card and we'll take care of the rest, charging your card on your behalf once a month. If you'd like to join or need more information, see details on the reply card enclosed in this issue of Dispatch or find more information on ACF's website at [www.akcf.org](http://www.akcf.org).