

From the Desk
Of
Karin Holser
Box 938
St. George Island, AK 99591

4 October 2016

The President of the United States of America
Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Barack Obama:

I can not tell you how pleased I am that the Alaska Native Community of St. George Island, Alaska, a tiny island in the Bering Sea, has put in a nomination for a Marine Sanctuary. I first came to the Pribilof Islands here in the Bering Sea to work for US Fish and Wildlife Service on a program to help the local kids understand what a unique and special place their island is. Not only are the cliffs teeming with millions of nesting seabirds, and the rocky beaches are covered with thousands of breeding northern fur seals, but the cultural history is also very rich. The Pribilof Canyon just 25 miles south of the island provides a conduit through which the deep waters of the Bering Sea basin mix with the continental shelf waters creating one of the richest ecosystems in the world. Needless to say I fell in love with these islands from the first time I set foot on them, and well I haven't really left.

I have witnessed the community of St. George work for many years trying to gain a voice in how the waters surrounding the islands were being managed, but their voice is still not being heard. But now I have faith that the National Marine Sanctuary Program might finally give them that voice. It is so unfair - I sit and watch out my window - these brave fishermen and women go out in their small skiffs fishing for halibut, only to watch a massive trawling vessel drag the bottom right where they would like to set their longlines. The waters starting 3 miles off our southern shores, where our harbor is, are open to any and all fishing. How is a small (10 - 20' max) skiff operator to compete with a 100+ foot trawler?

This is not a new effort: Pribilofian fishermen and subsistence hunters have a track record for working together, plus networking with outside fishermen and scientists to advance ecosystem-based management for the region (PIHCZ 1995; Fur Seal Co-management, Pribilof Island Collaborative). When the collective single management actions did not yield results for slowing precipitous seal and fish stock declines, the St. George Traditional Council submitted the first Tribal nomination for a Federal Marine Protected Area - the Pribilof Domain Cultural Heritage Zone in October of 2011. Advancement of this nomination was stymied by NMFS officials whom failed to recognize the 60-mile fur seal protection zone that was established in 1913. Yet, the community did not give up. The St. George community fishermen, tribal members and others persisted in requesting adjustments to fishing regulations to reduce young halibut bycatch, king crab habitat damage and fur seal protections through the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC). These modest requests to address multiple species declines in Pribilof Domain were overshadowed by industrial fishing interests or simply NPFMC members' priorities

and single species exploitation focus. Meanwhile, keystone area creatures and their culturally prized species, the iconic northern fur seal, made no significant recovery. Recognizing the uniqueness of the Pribilof canyon and role in supporting life on their island, Unangan leaders reached for a more holistic solution. In June of 2014 several St. George tribal members travelled to Washington DC to continue their quest to access better tools and strategies for protecting waters around their island. During that eastward expedition, they thanked you, President Obama, for opening the National Marine Sanctuary program site evaluation list and signaled that they would be putting a nomination forward.

Therefore, I encourage you to accept the Community of St. George's National Marine Sanctuary nomination and to designate the waters surrounding our island as a National Marine Sanctuary. This designation will help to protect a national treasure, an area known as the "Galagos of the North!"

Sincerely,

Karin Holser
Coordinator
St. George Island Institute

This same letter was sent to Senators Murkowski and Sullivan, and Rep. Young.

Congratulations to the Alaska Native Unangan Community of St. George, a tiny island in the Bering Sea, for taking advantage of a wonderful opportunity to experience more self-determination. I have had the honor of working and living in the Pribilof Islands since 1995, and

was pleasantly surprised by their most recent initiative to protect the natural environment. The St. George community have nominated the waters surrounding their island to be considered for designation as a National Marine Sanctuary.

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The National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSP) is a management strategy which allows for more efficient collaboration among state, federal and tribal agencies to achieve management objectives. The NMSP is not a "lock up" the resources program. On the contrary, commercial activities are allowed and encouraged. The NMSP does provide communities located near Sanctuaries with more influence to formulate strategies for what goes on in the waters that sustain them.

The level of formal Alaska Native input on marine waters stewardship that can be achieved through the Sanctuary program is not available to tribal members through the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. Although tribal communities rely intimately upon ocean resources for spiritual, subsistence and economic well-being, their role in the NPFMC is through a narrow "consultative" interaction, whereas Indigenous people serve on National Marine Sanctuary advisory councils, hold research, management and enforcement jobs in marine sanctuaries, and are otherwise more equitably engaged in ocean management. Sanctuary programs also involve other marine management entities such as the Coast Guard, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, State agencies, in decision making. All of these agencies individually have an impact on management decisions regarding resources that affect communities, but there are no community seats at the decision table.

My friends and neighbors in the Unangan Community of St. George have explained to me that they see the National Marine Sanctuary program as a **welcome opportunity for them to finally have a determining influence in their own future. As climate impacts, increased vessel traffic, declining budgets and other changes loom large in the Bering Sea, locally focused adaptive management is key to survival.** Indeed, this is what self-determination is

all about - being empowered to make decisions that affect the St. George community, Unangan culture and the future of their island, resources and deeply cherished next generation, their children.

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