

St. George Unangan Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Fact Sheet

St. George's marine environment is a natural wonder of great global and local significance

St. George, one of the Pribilof Islands, is sometimes described as the “Galapagos of the North”. The island is home to the Unangan people as well as some of the world’s most magnificent biodiversity and natural beauty. Populations of Northern fur seals (about 50% of the world-wide population), Steller Sea Lions, otters, cetaceans have long been a source of wonder and benefit to our community and visitors alike. The island is an essential breeding and rearing habitat for over 200 species of seabirds numbering in the millions. Many of these non-resident birds arrive at St. George after having flown from wintering habitat in Europe, Asia, remote Pacific islands and points south within the U.S, including sanctuaries in California and Hawaii, making St. George’s seabird population globally significant. St. George’s waters are home to extremely significant fish populations – including walleye pollock, Pacific halibut, snow crab and red king crab – that provide prey for marine mammals, catch for fishermen and a crucial food source for the Unangan people of St. George. Our community depends on a healthy marine environment for food, culture and its economy.

The island's rich biodiversity is under threat

St. George’s habitat, and the fate of the community, is now threatened. Marine mammal and bird populations have been in steady decline, as confirmed by both science and the community’s day-to-day observations and experiences. The waters around St. George and the Bering Sea face multiple stresses and additional threats are on the horizon as climate change progresses, sea ice recedes and international commercial interest in the Arctic grows. Conservation is urgently needed to protect the island’s precious marine life, to build resilience against the consequences of climate change and to save our community.

The proposed National Marine Sanctuary

In the face of these challenges, and to save our community, we have submitted a nomination to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for the creation of the St. George Unangan Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. St. George’s nomination can be found here: <http://www.nominate.noaa.gov/nominations/st-george-unangan-nomination.pdf> National Marine Sanctuaries protect natural and cultural resources while allowing people to use and enjoy the ocean in a sustainable way. Sanctuaries are nominated by local communities. NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries reviews nominations. If NOAA determines that a nomination meets the criteria for becoming a sanctuary, a separate multi-year, public stakeholder consultation designation process is required by law before a sanctuary can be formally designated. The designation process typically lasts 3-5 years and provides an opportunity for the views of all interested parties to be taken into account. Like other national marine sanctuaries, St. George’s would protect subsistence and strengthen our local economy by boosting tourism, research and education.