



Unangan Native Victor “Sassy” Malavansky is a lifelong resident of St. George Island, Pribilof Domain, Bering Sea. Victor is retired mechanic, tribal member of the Aleut Community of St. George Island, and city councilman for the City of St. George.

Letter to the Editor

Opinion of an Unangan Man from St. George Island

I have lived on St. George Island my entire life. Our community has seen huge transitions here, from Russian control, American seal harvesting days to these days of industrial fishing right outside our front door. During the past few generations, we Unangan people of St. George have seen a steady decline in seabird populations, as well as Northern fur seals and Steller sea lions around the island. This is very disconcerting to us as a people that are dependent upon subsistence harvest of this wildlife. The ocean is our food security out here. Besides mammals and birds, the declines in halibut and other fish we depend on. Our subsistence fishermen can barely catch enough fish to even hold a community potluck these days.

Every summer, researchers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service are here doing counts to gage the well-being of the birds and seals and their findings document continual decline of these species. Offshore, halibut surveys and crab surveys continue to show that the size of crab and halibut are getting smaller, and those stocks also are in extremely low numbers – nearly commercially extinct in this area.

In addition to these counting events, we need more intensive research to address *why* this is happening and to see what can be done to reverse the declines in these creatures. Perhaps some of the local observations of decades of changes out here could help inform the thinking about a recovery strategy for this part of the world. Our subsistence lifestyle, our cultural identity, and the ecosystem around St. George Island depends on this.

We believe that the restoration this diverse and rich ecosystem into a healthy one will benefit everyone, from subsistence hunters, tourism, our children, the commercial industry, etc. If we can get this right in this very small part of the Bering Sea shelf and around our island that our community is nominating for a National Marine Sanctuary, the creatures that recover can expand out into the areas and strengthen weakened populations beyond the sanctuary.

Through years of our community studying options for sustaining the wildlife around St. George, I have come to learn that the process of creating a National Marine Sanctuary is a multistep sequence of public engagement stages. It is a very transparent process in which all stake holders express their views in the process that can take a year or two to implement, if it is determined to be a good solution at all. After these years of trying to find an solution, the great majority of St. George tribal members support advancing this nomination for a sanctuary. By exploring the potential for having a National Marine Sanctuary style management, we hope that it could improve coordination between researchers, managers and tribal members, plus shape strategies for helping the wildlife of the area recover and help revitalize our ancient yet fragile Unangan cultural heritage for future generations. Victor F. Malavansky