

Answers sought in sea lion decline

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Researchers from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and the state said they want a fuller picture about why Alaska's sea lion population is falling.

The number of Steller sea lions in one area plummeted during the last three decades. Researchers theorize several conditions -- overfishing, changing climate and whale attacks -- could be the culprits. Now they're eyeing state-sanctioned sea lion hunts and shootings, outlawed since the 1990s, to see whether they played a role as well, the Anchorage (Alaska) Daily News said Friday.

The Steller sea lions population in an area extending to Attu Island was declared endangered in 1997, after peaking at 195,000 in the 1970s. In 2004, the population in the western stock was estimated at about 45,000.

Effects of the killing of pups for pelts or fishermen killing sea lions to protect fish or gear haven't been significantly studied, the newspaper said. Researchers said they are conducting interviews to get a better idea of how many sea lions were shot.

Toby Sullivan, a Kodiak, Alaska, resident interviewed about his participation in a sea lion kill, said the research will be flawed because it's anecdotal.

"All they'll get is the emotional echo of something that happened 30 years ago," he told the Daily News.

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