

The Aleutian Islands: A Unique Ecosystem

The Aleutians – the longest archipelago in the world stretching from the United States to Siberia



The Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea

These treasures of the north are a truly unique and mystical place in Alaska because of their rich history and exceptional biological importance. Located between the Bering Sea and the deep Aleutian Trench, these underwater mountains form a steep, rocky shelf abruptly off shore. Here, the combination of rich nutrients, strong currents, and complex seafloor create one of the **most productive and diverse ocean habitats in the world**, and because of this, millions of birds and marine mammals visit these islands every year. The Aleutian Islands are home to the Aleut people and some of the world's richest fisheries.



Village of Unalaska, Aleutian Islands, Geoff Shester

Commercial fisheries are a powerful economic engine in Alaska and provide important resources for local communities. From the Aleut people who have subsisted for over 9,000 years on the ocean's bounty to the billion dollar fishing industry, the stakes are high in the Aleutians and a flourishing ecosystem is critical.

Corals and Sponges in the Aleutians

It is no surprise that the seafloor in the Aleutians is every bit as spectacular as the rest of the ecosystem. Here, over 100 species of corals and sponges form majestic deep-sea gardens, comparable in their majesty to the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. In the deep-sea, these animals grow very slowly. Scientists believe some corals and sponges may be **hundreds of years old**. Some of these animals may have been alive before Europeans arrived in North America. Because of their longevity, scientists use coral tree rings to study historic changes in sea temperature. Researchers also utilize them to develop medicines to treat human diseases.



Northern Rockfish, NMFS

Fish Need Habitat

Not only are these beautiful corals and sponges long-lived, but they also form a critical link in the complex Aleutian ecosystem. Major commercial fish and shellfish species like rockfish, Atka mackerel, Pacific cod, golden king crab, and their prey are intimately dependent on complex seafloor habitat. Deep-sea corals and sponges provide **protection, spawning areas, feeding grounds, and nurseries** for fish and shellfish. Without these diverse colonial animals of the deep-sea, a vital component of the ecosystem and the fisheries it supports would be lost.



Bubble Gum Coral off the Aleutian Islands, NMFS

Our Concerns

Considering the importance of the Aleutian ecosystem to wildlife and people, we must ensure that our activities today do not negatively impact future generations.



Bottom trawl fishing gear

Bottom trawling is an indiscriminate method of fishing that drags heavy nets, tires, and cables over large areas of the seafloor. Corals and sponges are extremely vulnerable to destructive fishing practices and will not recover for centuries. The National Academy of Sciences concludes that **bottom trawling reduces the biodiversity, productivity, and complexity of sensitive seafloor ecosystems**. As a group of organizations that recognizes the importance of the Aleutian Islands to fisheries, wildlife, and local communities, the Alaska Oceans Network is concerned about the impacts of bottom trawling on the Aleutian seafloor.

In Alaska, over one million pounds of corals and sponges are removed from the seafloor every year by commercial fishing, and over 97% of all observed coral and sponge bycatch is caused by bottom trawling. Over half of this bycatch in Alaska occurs in the Aleutian Islands, where corals and sponges are most diverse and abundant. Bottom trawling can destroy tons of corals and sponges in a single tow, clearcutting large stands of this complex seafloor habitat.

If we wait to see further proof that destroying corals and sponges will decrease fish productivity, it will already be too late...

For additional information please contact:
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The Alaska Oceans Network

The Alaska Oceans Network is a new coalition representing conservation, environmental, fishing, and Alaska Native interests, and is dedicated to restoring and maintaining healthy marine ecosystems in the North Pacific and the Bering Sea.

Our Oceans

Healthy oceans are vitally important to biological diversity, species survival, cultural identity, public recreation and economic prosperity here in Alaska and throughout the world. Our oceans provide our weather, the food we eat, and over half of the oxygen we breathe. Life began in the ocean and 80% of all life on Earth today resides in the ocean. The oceans off Alaska's 33,000 miles of coastline are some of the most productive in the world, supporting an extraordinary array of marine mammal and seabird species and the most productive fisheries in the world. Alaska has more ocean than the rest of the U.S. and contributes over half of all seafood produced in the nation.



Kodiak Boat Harbor, Geoff Shester

MEMBERS

Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association
www.alaskaoceans.net/alfa

Alaska Marine Conservation Council
www.akmarine.org

Bering Sea Council of Elders
www.alaskaoceans.net/bsce

Cook Inlet Keeper
www.inletkeeper.org

Earthjustice
www.earthjustice.org

National Environmental Trust
www.environet.org

Oceana
www.oceana.org

The Ocean Conservancy
www.oceanconservancy.org

Trustees for Alaska
www.trustees.org

World Wildlife Fund
www.worldwildlife.org

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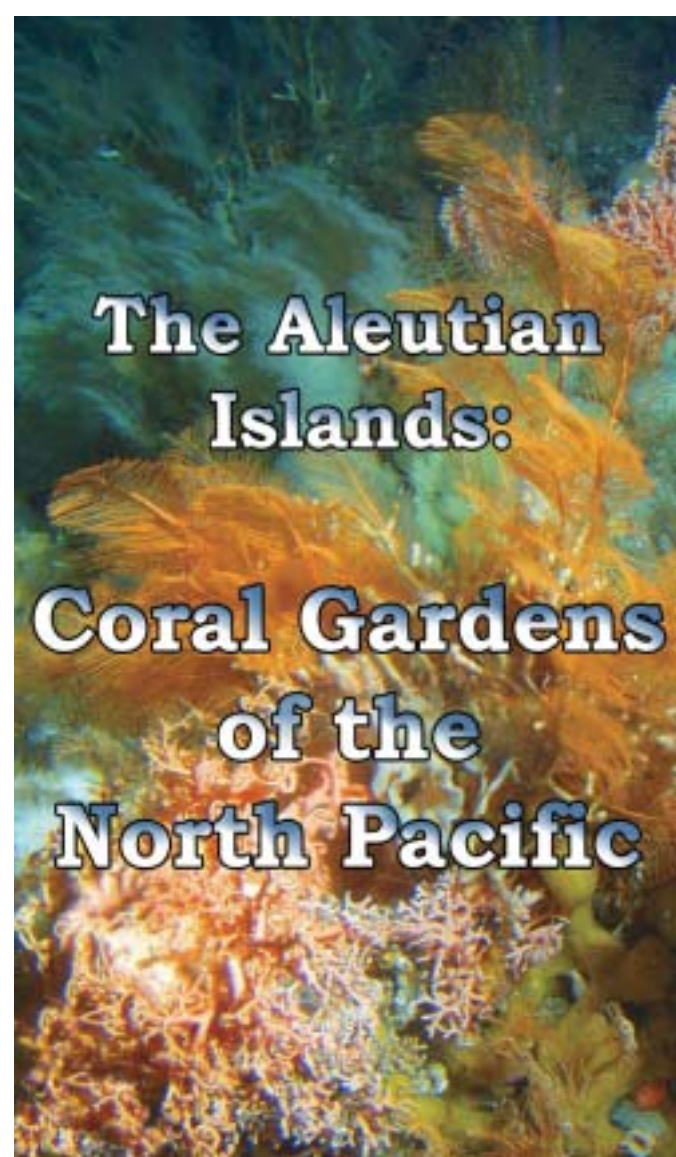
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