

FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2009

Northern fur seals population decline prompts study

Research collaboration offers educational outreach to schoolchildren and rare viewing opportunity for public

VANCOUVER, BC – Today at the Vancouver Aquarium, Grade 5 students from St. Paul Island, Alaska, helped introduce **Northern fur seal pups** to a temporary home in the Aquarium's display exhibits. The students assisted research staff today from UBC's Marine Mammal Research Unit (MMRU) and the Vancouver Aquarium, as the animals were moved **providing the public with a rare opportunity to see this magnificent species from May 15 – 26, 2009.**

The pups are participating in long-term studies critical to understanding the population decline of this species in the wild. The Alaska breeding population which feeds and migrates through Canadian waters, has been declining since 1998 at an approximate rate of 6% per year. Reasons for the decline are unknown. In 2006, COSEWIC (the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada) declared Northern fur seals as a threatened species due to the unexpected rapid rate of decline.

"We know that their numbers are getting smaller, but we do not have the data to determine why" says Dr. Andrew W. Trites, Director of UBC's Marine Mammal Research Unit. "The fur seal pups may hold the key to unlocking this ecological mystery, and contribute to the conservation of fur seals in the wild."

The Vancouver Aquarium's commitment to conservation-based research and education initiatives, in conjunction with UBC's MMRU, offers the Grade 5 Aleut students the ongoing opportunity to connect with researchers to study marine science and follow the pup's progress.

The Grade 5 students from Alaska are excited to be part of this unique educational opportunity. The fur seal pups were given Aleut names by the children. Following are the Aleut names with English translation in brackets: Meechi (ball), Tikva (pumpkin), Tuku (chief), Kyoo (berry), Aya (friend), Ani (lake).

The six female pups in the research program live in a behind-the-scenes habitat at the Vancouver Aquarium. "The pups are well acclimated to their home and receive the highest standards of veterinary care, husbandry and support. They are terrific animals to work with – cute and feisty – and their outsized flippers give them a bit of a waddle-walk on land but enable them to be fabulously acrobatic swimmers," says Dr. Martin Haulena, staff veterinarian at the Vancouver Aquarium.

The Northern fur seal pups are known to be extremely playful in water. During their brief 12-day stay in the Aquarium's display exhibit, the public will have a rare opportunity to view their behaviour at the water's surface and in an underwater viewing gallery, and to learn about the fur seals' history during public interpretive sessions.

Footage & Stills

HD video footage of the Northern fur seals is online on the Vancouver Aquarium's YouTube channel at <http://youtube.com/vancouveraquarium>. Additional b-roll and still photos are available on request.

About the University of British Columbia Marine Mammal Research Unit:

MMRU addresses questions relevant to interactions between humans and marine mammals; marine mammals as indicators of ecosystem change; and the natural history, biology & conservation of marine mammals. Visit <http://www.marinemammal.org/MMRU>

About the Vancouver Aquarium:

The Vancouver Aquarium is a self-supporting, non-profit association dedicated to effecting the conservation of aquatic life through display and interpretation, conservation practices, education, research, and direct action. Please visit www.vanaqua.org

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