UNDERSTANDING THE PAST TO SAVE OUR FUTURE: A CASE STUDY OF STELLER SEA LION MANAGEMENT Session: B, Breakout Room #24

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 The alarming rate of biodiversity loss poses a threat to not only our planet's natural systems, but human health and well-being as well. Despite current conservation management efforts, some studies estimate wildlife populations have declined an average of 69% in the last 5 decades. Understanding how conservation management can be improved is crucial. The purpose of this study was to analyze conservation policy and management through the case of the western Steller sea lion, a population that has been listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act since 1990. To do so, I worked with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to provide quality control and quality assessment of aerial imagery, gathering data on Steller sea lion population dynamics. Additionally, I conducted a semi-systematic review of relevant literature and analyzed data on population count and key management events. From my research, I was able to identify three areas impeding the effectiveness of Steller sea lion management: insufficient collaboration between agencies, including a lack of consensus surrounding research priorities, inconsistencies in research findings/scientific uncertainty, and a heavy political influence. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for the long-term recovery and sustainability of this marine mammal population. Ultimately, this case study reveals the larger discrepancies between conservation efforts and population decline, allowing agencies to focus on solutions that not only benefit the western Steller sea lion, but endangered species populations as a whole.