

Gravina Access Project
Federal and State Listed
Threatened and Endangered Species
Technical Memorandum



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Prepared for:



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Background Information

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is mandated to list plant and animal species in need of federal protection. There is a detailed process that agencies, the scientific community, and the general public must follow in order to have a species listed as threatened or endangered. Once an animal or plant is listed, all protective measures authorized by the ESA apply to the species and in some cases its habitat. Measures include protection from any adverse effects of federal activities; restrictions on taking, transporting, or selling a species; authorization for the USFWS to develop and carry out recovery plans; the authority to purchase important habitat; and federal aid to state wildlife agencies that have cooperative agreements with the USFWS (USFWS 2000).

If a threatened or endangered species has the potential to inhabit a project area, informal consultation with the USFWS or the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), in the case of marine mammals and fish, is required under section 7 of the ESA. The procedure involves informal consultation including working with the agency to determine whether a project will adversely impact a listed threatened or endangered species. If necessary, a more detailed formal consultation process may follow.

In the State of Alaska, the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) maintains the Alaska Endangered Species List and a Species of Special Concern List separate from the USFWS and the NMFS. Every two years ADF&G takes public comment on the lists to determine whether certain species should be added or removed. Usually, all federally listed endangered species are included on the State endangered species list. However, if ADF&G does not believe that the listing is justified, the species may not be included (Koehl 2000).

Although the state does not maintain a threatened species list, ADF&G lists sensitive species that are not endangered as Alaska Species of Special Concern. Species of Special Concern are Alaskan species experiencing population declines or vulnerability to a significant decline due to low numbers, restricted distribution, dependence on limited habitat resources, or sensitivity to environmental disturbance (ADF&G 1998).

Endangered species are protected by state statute that forbids the disturbance of state-listed endangered species. The project sponsor is required to identify any endangered species in the project area, determine whether its project would disturb listed species, and document its findings. If the project will result in disturbing species, an application for a state “Scientific Educational Permit” from the Division of Wildlife Conservation must be completed. According to ADF&G, although not required by state regulations, the above process should also be followed for state-listed species of special concern (Koehl 2000).

Federally Listed Protected Species

Currently, The USFWS asserts that there are no listed species under its jurisdiction in the Gravina Access Project area (Woods 2000). In previous documentation, threatened and endangered species were acknowledged to inhabit Gravina and Revillagigedo Islands. The “Tongass Narrows Crossing Environmental Impact Statement” prepared in 1994 (Montgomery Watson 1994) listed the American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) and the arctic peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus tundrius*) as threatened or endangered bird species and the marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus maroratus*) and the harlequin duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) as candidate 2 species that may possibly exist in the Gravina Access Project area. Since that time, the USFWS removed the falcon subspecies from the federal list and halted the “category” designation. Additionally, although the endangered short-tailed albatross’ (*Diomedea albatrus*) range includes Southeast Alaska, the bird has only been sighted in the Aleutian Islands, Bering Sea, and the Gulf of Alaska and is not expected to frequent protected, inland waters, like those of the project area (ADF&G 1998; Brown 2000).

The NMFS lists two species found in project area as endangered; Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*) and humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Both species are additionally protected under the Marine Mammal Act of 1972.

In the 1970s, the Alaska population of Steller (or northern) sea lions was estimated at 242,000 individuals. Since that time, the number of sea lions in Alaska has declined by 70%, and the animal was included on the federal list as endangered in 1990 (MacDonald and Cook 1999). Conversely, the population of Steller sea lion in southeast Alaska increased from 5,945 in 1992 to 6,496 in 1994 (9.3% increase) (Strick et. al. 1997). Annual counts of sea lions between 1985-1990 indicated that sea lion populations in Tongass Narrows were large and stable (Montgomery Watson 1994). In the Narrows, sea lions are commonly observed feeding along the waterfront adjacent to the City of Ketchikan. They are likely attracted to the heavy concentrations of herring, crab, and rockfish found in this area (Ketchikan Gateway Borough 1994; Freitag 2000).

The largest Steller sea lion rookery in the world is found in Southeast Alaska on Forrester Island. These sea lions use approximately 50 haulout sites scattered throughout the Southeast Alaska Coast (MacDonald and Cook 1999) including one on the west side of Gravina in Clarence Strait. However, no sea lion haulouts are found in the project area (Frietag 2000).

North Pacific humpback whales were listed as endangered in 1966. It is estimated that 15,000 humpback whales inhabited the North Pacific prior to mechanized commercial whaling. Today, scientists estimate approximately 2,000 humpback in existence. No factors, other than overexploitation, are known to have contributed to their decline. More than 500 humpbacks inhabit the marine waters near Southeast Alaska during the summer (MacDonald and Cook 1999). Although the whales do not use Tongass Narrows for extended periods of time, they travel through the area (Frietag 2000).

State of Alaska Listed Species

The humpback whale is found in the project area and is included on the State of Alaska endangered species list. Information regarding the whale in the project area is outlined above. Additionally, in the project area, the State of Alaska lists American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*), northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis laingi*), Steller sea lion, and the harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina richardsi*) as species of special concern.

The American peregrine falcon was removed from the USFWS Division of Endangered Species Threatened, Endangered, and Candidate Species List on August 1999. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) reports that these species are not found in the project area. A similar species, the Peale's peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus pealei*) is sometimes seen in the project area feeding on pigeons. However, the birds mainly inhabit open water on outer islands near seabird colonies (Brown 2000).

The northern (queen charlotte) goshawk is an uncommon forest-dwelling raptor. The birds use open sage steppes, dense deciduous, and coniferous forest for foraging and nest exclusively in old growth and mature forests. In Southeast Alaska, harvest of old growth and mature forest habitat is the primary threat to goshawk populations. Other human activities such as mining and urban development may also limit goshawk nesting and foraging habitat (ADF&G 1998).

According to the US Forest Service (USFS) northern goshawk are a major concern in the Tongass National Forest, and it is likely that the northern goshawk may use the Gravina Access Project area for foraging. The agency has seen individuals and displaying pairs on the west side of Gravina Island and believes they nest there. However, reports of a nest in the Facina Bay area have not been confirmed by the USFS (Brown 2000).

In the Gulf of Alaska and Prince William Sound, harbor seal numbers declined substantially from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. However, based on three aerial survey routes of terrestrial haulouts near Ketchikan and Sitka and in Glacier Bay, the population of harbor seal in Southeast Alaska appears to be increasing or stable in recent years, and seals are thought to be relatively abundant (Small 1998). Harbor seals inhabit Tongass Narrows including the waterfront area adjacent to the City of Ketchikan year round (Montgomery Watson 1994). They feed on pelagic and bottom fishes, crustaceans, and octopus (Lowry and Frost 1981).

Conclusions

Table 1 presents federal and state listed threatened, endangered, and species of special concern that may be found in the Gravina Access Project area based on currently available information and personal communication with USFWS and NMFS. To be certain, the lead federal agency for the project, in this case Federal Highway Administration, must send a letter to USFWS and NMFS requesting a list of threatened or endangered species in the Gravina Access Project area. Based on previous

communication with the agencies and depending on project alternatives, it is likely that no species under USFWS management will be identified. However, it is likely that the consultation conducted pursuant to section 7 of the ESA will be required with NMFS regarding Steller sea lion and humpback whale.

It is unlikely that the project will affect state-listed species. However, more research regarding potential impacts of project alternatives on the humpback whale, Steller sea lion, northern goshawk, and harbor seal will be completed to determine if further consultation with the state is required.

Table 1.
Federal and State Listed Species with Potential to Occur
in the Gravina Access Project Area

Federal	State
Endangered Species	
Humpback whale	Humpback whale
Steller sea lion	
Threatened Species	
None	None*
Species of Special Concern	
None**	American peregrine falcon
	Northern goshawk
	Steller sea lion
	Harbor seal

*The State of Alaska does not have a threatened species category.

**The US Government does not have a species of special concern category.

Source: Alaska Department of Fish and Game. State of Alaska Endangered Species List. State of Alaska Species of Special Concern as of January 21, 2000; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Division of Endangered Species U.S. Listed Vertebrate Animal Species Index by Lead Region and Status as of January 31, 2000; personal communication with ADF&G, USFWS, NMFS, and USFS personnel (see sources).

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