

Backgrounder

The Proposed Scott Islands marine National Wildlife Area

December 3, 2016

ISSUE: Environment and Climate Change Canada's process to officially designate Scott Islands marine National Wildlife Area (mNWA) is in the final stages of consultation and approval. This designation could provide protection for the area's high abundance of seabirds and rich marine biodiversity, however CPAWS has concerns with the current proposal.

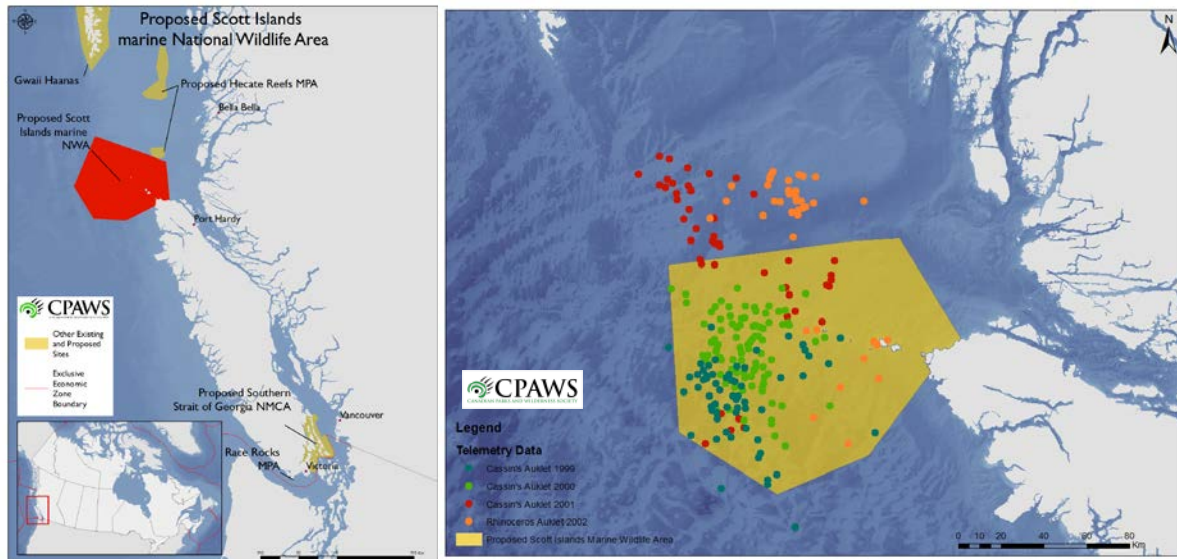


Figure 1: Location of the SimNWA (left) and bird telemetry data for the SimNWA (right).

THE AREA

The Scott Islands are internationally recognized as a globally significant seabird area. The islands and surrounding waters support the highest concentration of breeding seabirds on the BC coast (and south of Alaska). The ocean waters in this area are rich as a result of nutrient upwelling, which provides essential food for nesting birds to feed their chicks. About 40 % of the seabirds that breed in B.C. nest on the Scott Islands - this includes about half of the world's Cassin's auklet¹, 90% of Canada's tufted puffin², 95% of Pacific Canada's common murre³ and 7% of the global rhinoceros auklet⁴ population. This region is also of immense importance to fork-tailed storm-petrels⁵ and black-footed albatrosses⁶. Seabird populations were previously estimated at approximately 2 million in the late 1990s, however since those estimates were made significant declines in Cassin's auklet¹ and common murre³ bring the total seabird population closer to 1.4 million. The marine area around the Scott Islands has been identified as an 'Ecologically and Biologically Significant Area' in the Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area (PNCIMA), and as an 'Important Bird Area' by BirdLife International.



BACKGROUND

- 1971: Three provincial Ecological Reserves were established on three islands, and additional islands and nearshore marine areas were protected as Provincial Parks in 1995.
- April 2007: The Federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans announced Health of the Oceans funding to *'protect important foraging areas for seabird populations on the Scott Islands'*
- 2010: Environment Canada formed a Steering Committee and Advisory Group for the planning and establishment process of the mNWA (to be protected under the Canadian Wildlife Act).
- June 2010 – Feb 2012: Stakeholder consultation meetings were held to inform the planning of this future NWA. A draft regulatory intent document was released in Feb. 2012.
- March 2013: The draft Regulatory Strategy was released for a 60-day public comment period.
- CURRENT STATUS: The Government of Canada will soon be releasing the draft regulations in Canada Gazette 1 for public comment.

OUTSTANDING CONCERNS BASED ON THE DRAFT REGULATORY STRATEGY

- **The federal government's plans for the mNWA do not fully address existing industrial activities such as commercial fishing or shipping, weakening the ability of the area to *conserve the ecosystems*.** Upon designation of the Scott Islands mNWA, the Minister will authorize, through public notice, existing activities as they are currently managed. In other words, all current human activities, including the two most important activities in the region - fishing and shipping, will continue.
- **Proof of harm from industrial and commercial activity is required before any management steps are taken.** This contradicts the 'Precautionary Principle' that guides Canada's environmental policy as stated in the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. ECCC has said it will evaluate the impacts of fishing practices on seabird foraging habitat. However, until these direct links are made, current activities will proceed unchecked. Effective implementation of this adaptive management model will require significant funding.
- **A significant portion of the marine area used for foraging by seabirds (primarily the Cassin's auklet) has not been included in the proposed boundary for the NWA (see above figure on the right).**

CPAWS POSITION

Since the mid 1990s, CPAWS-BC has been working with ECCC to protect the marine area around the Scott Islands as an mNWA. While we support ECCC's work to bring enhanced and coordinated management, surveillance and enforcement of activities to the area, there are concerns that the proposed protection measures will not go far enough. While CPAWS strongly encourages political support for the creation of this protected area, we would like to see a stronger commitment to conservation in the area through: 1) the improvement of the regulations to address the impacts of commercial fishing on seabirds, other species and marine ecosystems and the identification of 'no-take' areas to protect high value ecosystems; 2) the creation of shipping lanes and speed limits to reduce the impacts of noise, oil spills, disturbance and collision on seabirds and marine mammals, and 3) expansion of the current mNWA boundary northwards to capture a larger proportion of the Cassin's auklet's foraging area.

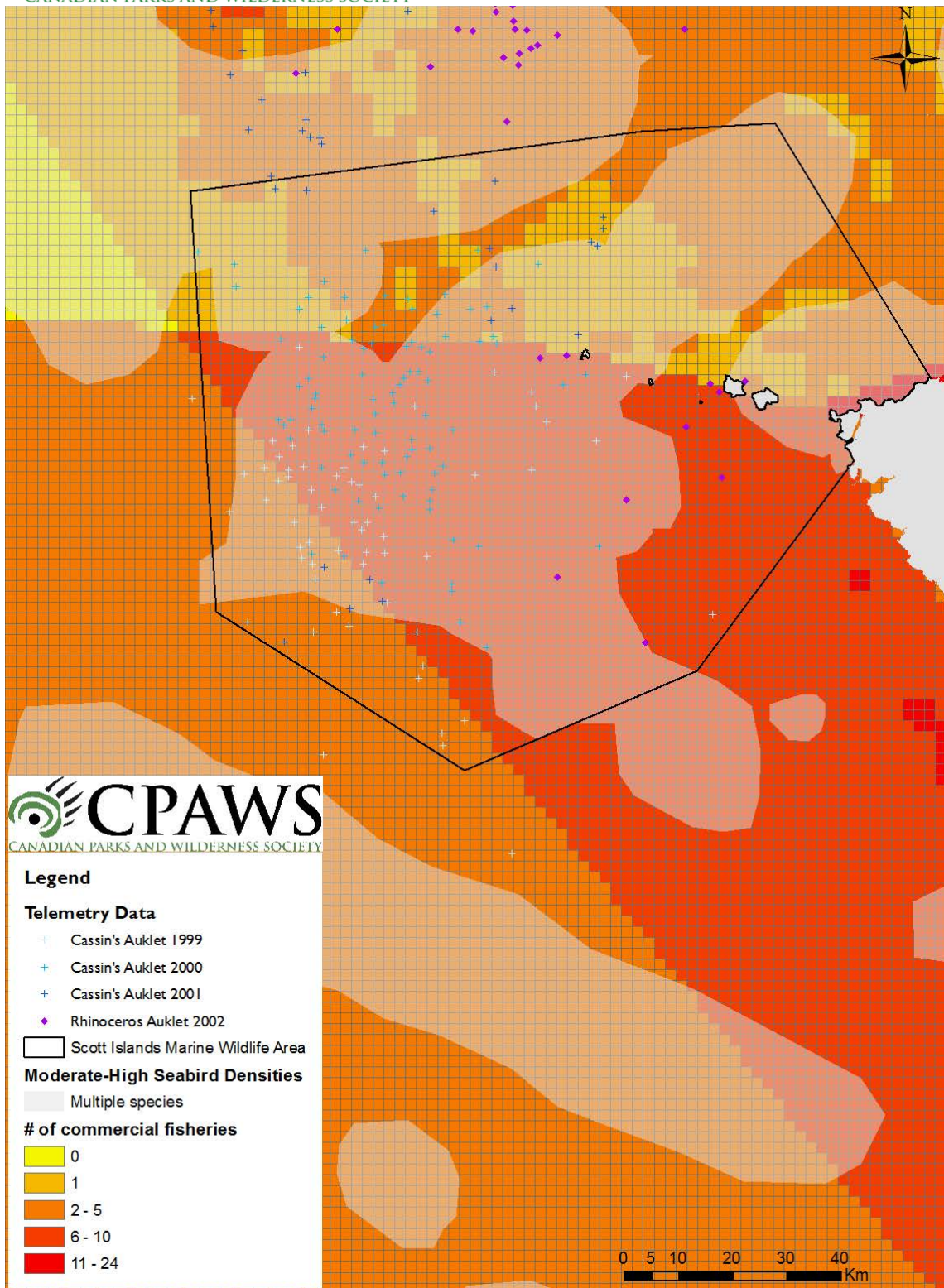


Figure 2 Seabird habitat range and number of commercial fisheries throughout the SlmNWA. Seabird range data was adapted from a November 2012 presentation provided to the steering committee, fisheries data was compiled from the BCMCA. Individual maps for each fishery footprint and individual species distributions are provided in Appendix 1 and 2).

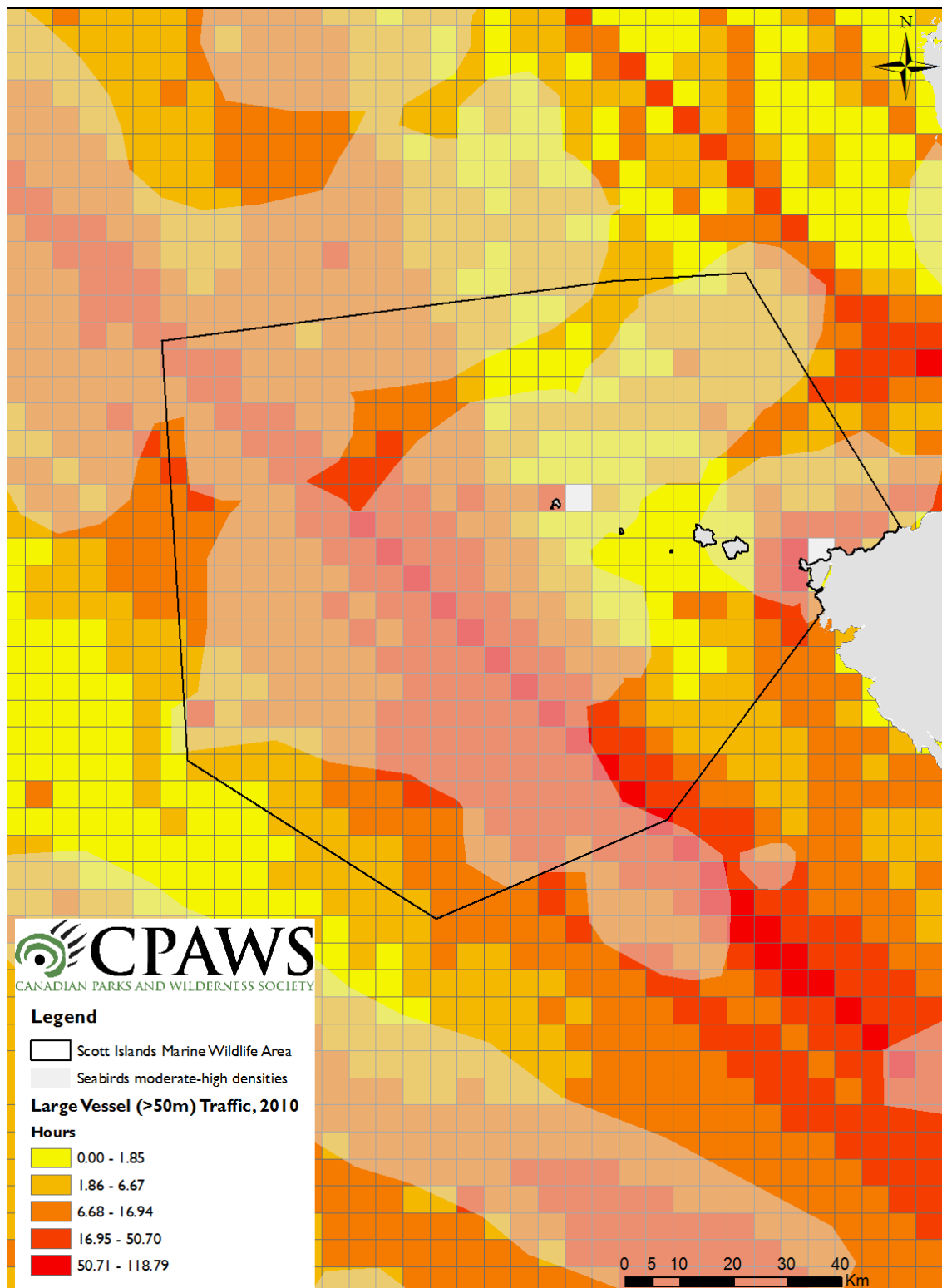


Figure 3. Large ship traffic through the SimNWA (data from BCMCA)