

SOVIET AND JAPANESE FISHING ACTIVITY OFF ALASKA IN 1964

By Ronald C. Naab*

BACKGROUND

The massive build-up of foreign fisheries in international waters off Alaska continues. Last year well over 1,000 of the world's most modern fishing and auxiliary vessels from Japan and the Soviet Union ranged in the offshore waters along Alaska's vast coastline, catching millions of tons of fish and whales.

Several years ago as those foreign fisheries began to expand, the U. S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries and the U. S. Coast Guard initiated cooperative patrols off Alaska. Coast Guard ships and aircraft capable of prolonged high-seas patrol are accompanied by Bureau agents who provide specialized fisheries knowledge. These cooperative patrols are augmented by one Bureau of Commercial Fisheries patrol boat which concentrates on areas closer ashore. The patrols enforce provisions of several international fisheries agreements and also gather information on foreign fisheries which are not subject to current agreements. Information on extra-treaty foreign fisheries is essential to determine their impact upon United States interests.



Fig. 1 - Trawl being hauled up the stern ramp of a 260-foot Japanese factory trawler in the eastern Bering Sea. The Japanese are rapidly adding to their fleets more of these highly capable ships which catch and process fish without need of accompanying factoryships.

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The cooperative patrols have been bolstered each year to keep pace with the expanding foreign fisheries. In 1964 five Coast Guard cutters and the Bureau's John R. Manning covered 60,000 miles on fisheries patrols of the eastern North Pacific and Bering Sea. The surface patrol units were augmented by nearly 150,000 miles of long-range aircraft patrols from Coast Guard Air Stations.

JAPANESE OPERATIONS

About 700 vessels were dispatched from Japan in 1964 to engage in fisheries of interest to United States, especially Alaska, fishery interests. Included were the Japanese high-sea salmon fishing fleets composed of 11 factoryships and 369 accompanying gill-net vessels.

FISH MEAL AND OIL FISHERY: The Japanese fish meal and oil fleets in the eastern Bering Sea last year consisted of five factoryships accompanied by nearly 150 trawlers. The first of those fleets appeared north of the Pribilof Islands in mid-April and by the end of May all five fleets were working in the eastern Bering Sea. A gradual northwest movement began in June and by the end of July the fleets had moved to the western Bering Sea. They remained off Siberia until late August when they again returned to the eastern Bering Sea for a short period, completed their catch quotas, and returned to Japan in early September.



Fig. 2 - The deck of a Japanese factoryship is covered to a depth of several feet with flounder and sole caught in the eastern Bering Sea near Bristol Bay. Fleets of trawlers deliver their catches to the factoryship, where the fish are reduced to meal and oil within a few hours. Workers selecting larger fish which are frozen for human consumption wear snowshoe-like boards on their feet to keep them from sinking into the mass of fish.

KING CRAB FISHERY: The 1964 Japanese king crab fishery off Alaska was composed of factoryships, each accompanied by six tangle-net setting vessels. Each factoryship carried aboard about eight small boats used for hauling and picking the tangle nets. The king crab fleets arrived north of the Alaska Peninsula in March and remained in that general area fulfilling their catch quotas in September of 235,000 cases of canned crab meat.

SHRIMP FISHERY: A shrimp factoryship with 12 accompanying trawlers operated in the eastern Bering Sea essentially throughout 1964. During the winter period when ice conditions prevented operations in the proven shrimping areas north of the Pribilofs, the fleet moved south to near Unimak Pass and fished primarily for Pacific ocean perch. A second shrimp factoryship, also accompanied by 12 trawlers, joined the fishery in April and operated generally north of the Pribilofs. The fleet departed for Japan in September.

HALIBUT AND SABLEFISH FISHERY: The Japanese employed seven long-line fishing vessels, one of which also served as a processor, in the halibut fishery of the eastern Bering Sea in 1964. They fished in the controversial Triangle area when the season opened in March, just as did the North Americans, found their halibut catches extremely low. The Japanese shortly shifted their efforts to other species, primarily sablefish and rockfish. This alternative also proved fruitless and by late April the Japanese long-line fleet abandoned the eastern Bering Sea and moved to grounds off Siberia. They did not return to the areas off Alaska.

An unexpected development this past year was the appearance of seven Japanese long-line fishing vessels in the Gulf of Alaska in the vicinity of Kodiak Island. It was found that those vessels were making excellent catches of sablefish, with some rockfish. There were no indications that salmon or halibut were caught.

The Japanese Government requires that vessels be licensed to fish in the Gulf of Alaska. Information on the Japanese vessels licensed to fish off Alaska revealed the long-line vessels were not authorized to operate in the Gulf of Alaska. Complete information on these vessels was forwarded through appropriate channels to the Government of Japan for its consideration and appropriate action.

WHALING: The level of Japanese whaling in the eastern North Pacific in 1964 was the same as in the past few years. Their fleets were comprised of three whale factoryships, each accompanied by seven whale killer vessels. Japanese whalers were active from late July into August and roamed from the western Aleutians to waters off southeast Alaska.

SALMON FISHERY: The Japanese high-seas salmon fishery in 1964 included 11 factoryships with 369 gill-net fishing vessels. The fleets deviated considerably from past patterns of operation, reportedly because of low catches. In the latter part of July and early August at least one fleet moved into the area near Adak close to the International North Pacific Fisheries Convention salmon abstention line of 175° West Longitude.

GULF OF ALASKA FISHERIES: In 1964 the Japanese licensed six trawlers to operate in the Gulf of Alaska. Included were 4 factory stern trawlers which fished primarily for Pacific ocean perch and 2 smaller side trawlers which fished for shrimp. The stern trawlers ranged from near the Shumagin Islands eastward to about Middleton Island, while the side trawlers were concentrated in a limited area off southwest Kodiak Island. The first of the trawlers appeared in the Gulf in May and all ended operations by the end of October. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries observers accompanied 3 of the stern trawlers to gather biological data on the effects of their trawling upon halibut and king crab.

U.S.S.R. FISHERIES

Soviet fishing efforts off Alaska were increased for the fifth consecutive year in 1964 and expanded into new species and areas. More than 500 Soviet vessels were associated with the fisheries of the Alaskan area.

HERRING FISHERY: One of the major Soviet fisheries for the past few years has been their winter trawling efforts for herring, generally north and west of the Pribilof Islands. In 1964 that fishery began in January and by early February it included more than 150 Soviet vessels. The herring fleet continued at about the same level until April, when they dispersed to other fisheries, reportedly because of adverse sea ice conditions.



Fig. 3 - Massive Soviet fishing fleets operate off Alaska throughout the year. During the winter, their trawling fleets fish along the edges of the ice pack in the eastern Bering Sea and move deeper into the pack to obtain shelter from the severe storms common in the area.

PACIFIC OCEAN PERCH FISHERY: As in past years, the Pacific ocean perch stocks off Alaska were a major objective of Soviet fishing efforts in 1964. The first of the ocean perch fleets appeared in the Gulf of Alaska off Yakutat in March when the herring fishery in the eastern Bering Sea began to disperse. By May the number of vessels involved in that fishery exceeded 150 and they were operating in the area from Albatross Bank southwest of Kodiak to off Yakutat in the eastern Gulf of Alaska. The strength of the ocean perch trawl fleets began to decline in June, reportedly due to the diversion of vessels to a highly productive saury fishery off Siberia, and by October the fleets numbered fewer than 20 vessels. Contrary to their operation in past years, the Soviets did not withdraw their fleets from the Gulf of Alaska with the onset of adverse winter weather but maintained a trawl fleet of 15 to 25 ships in the general area off Yakutat throughout 1964. The effort devoted to ocean perch marked the first time the Soviets maintained a fishery in the Gulf of Alaska during the treacherous winter period.

KING CRAB FISHERY: In 1964 the Soviets used three ultramodern factoryships in the king crab fishery near Alaska. Each of the factoryships was accompanied by three tangle-net setting trawlers. Two scouting trawlers explored for the fishery. Each factoryship carried 12 small boats from which the tangle nets were picked. The Soviet king crab fishery in 1964 operated in the outer Bristol Bay flats area from near Port Moller to Unimak Pass during the period April through July, when the fishery was ended. One of the crab factoryships unexpectedly appeared near Chirikof Island southwest of Kodiak in early April. The Department of State immediately protested this king crab tangle-net fishery in the Gulf of Alaska. Within two weeks the factoryship had returned to the Bering Sea. There was no further Soviet king crab fishing in 1964 in the Gulf of Alaska.

WHALING: Last year four Soviet whale factoryships, accompanied by nearly 50 whale killer ships, harvested whale stocks near Alaska. The whalers appeared off Alaska in June and ranged from the western Aleutians to south of Alaska's panhandle until their withdrawal in October. An interesting development in 1964 was the operation of two whaling fleets near the Pribilof Islands during August and September.

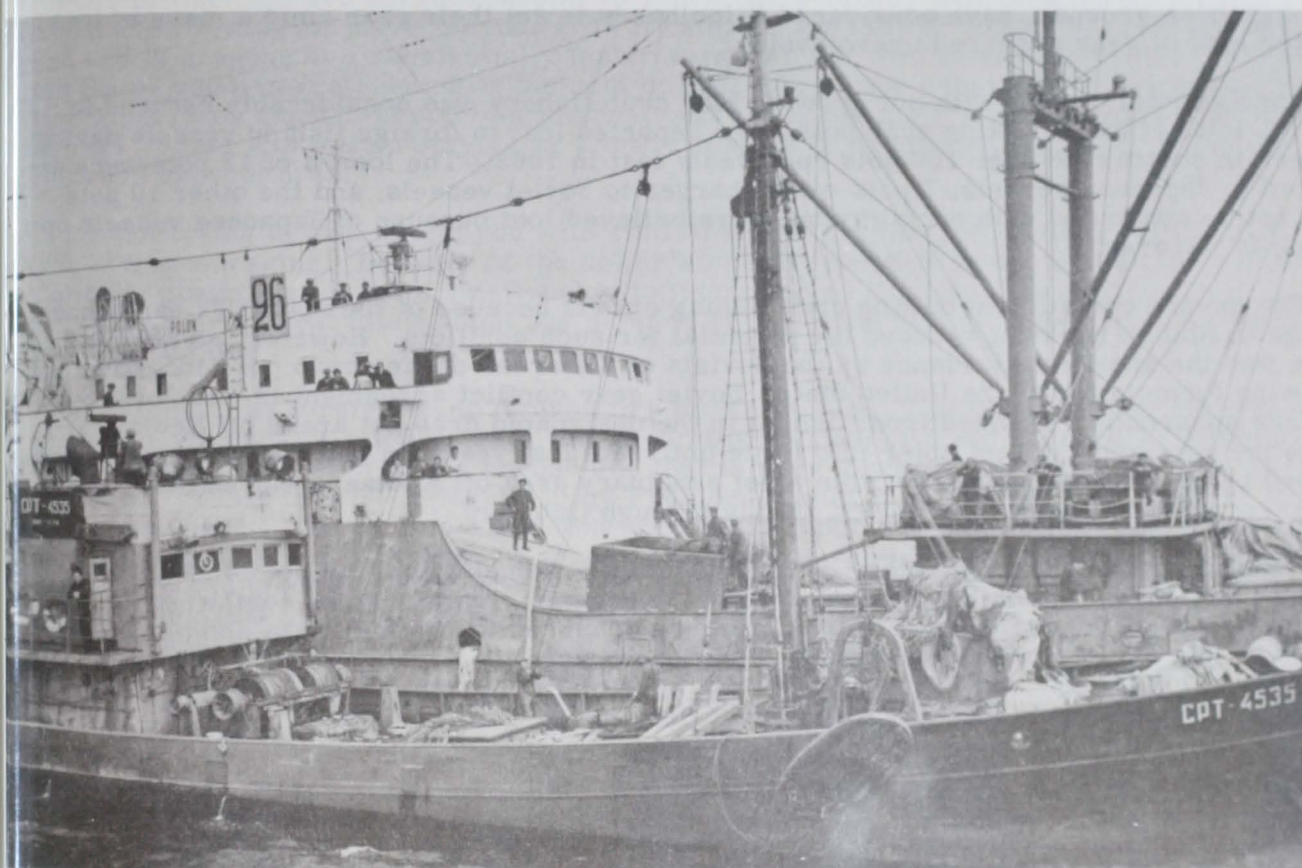


Fig. 4 - A Soviet SRT-type trawler delivering its catch of Pacific ocean perch to a refrigerated ship where the fish are frozen and later transported to the Soviet Union. Soviet fishing vessels such as these are becoming a common sight in offshore waters along much of Alaska's vast coastline.

SHRIMP FISHERY: For several years the Soviets have voiced an interest in starting a shrimp fishery off Alaska. Unconfirmed reports indicate that a limited shrimp fishery was begun in 1963. In 1964 the Soviets definitely conducted a trawl fishery for shrimp off Alaska. In April of 1964 two large Soviet trawlers of a new type were observed shrimp fishing near the Pribilof Islands in the same region now traditionally fished by the Japanese shrimp fleets. That fishery was apparently ended by June. However, in late October two more of those new trawlers were observed fishing shrimp southwest of Kodiak, an area also fished for shrimp by the Japanese. This Soviet shrimp fishery off Kodiak was terminated in December.

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE WITH U. S. FISHING ACTIVITIES

Continued expansion of the foreign fleets has brought them into areas where they overlap with United States fisheries and has periodically resulted in interference with our fisheries. This interference is of two general types: damage or loss of U. S. fishing gear caused by foreign vessels and denial of fishing areas to U. S. fishermen caused by the presence of large numbers of foreign vessels on desirable grounds. Thus far the Alaskan king crab and halibut fishermen who operate fixed fishing gear far offshore have felt the brunt of the foreign fleets in the high seas.

All reported interference with U. S. fishing activities by foreign fishing vessels in 1964 occurred in the Gulf of Alaska, primarily in the region off Kodiak. Six such incidents were reported by halibut fishermen and most of their complaints were directed at Soviet trawlers. A frequently voiced problem was the occupation by Soviet fleets of established halibut fishing grounds. The Russian trawling fleets have found the edges of Fairweather, Portlock, and Albatross Banks productive for Pacific ocean perch. Quite often our halibut fishermen, upon reaching those grounds, have considered it foolhardy to set their gear amid a mass of trawlers, for loss of gear appeared unavoidable.

Foreign interference with our growing king crab fishery was considerably reduced in 1964. A total of 29 U. S. king crab pots were reported lost to foreign fishing vessels during the year in contrast to over 100 pots reportedly lost in 1963. The losses of 12 pots were attributed to Japanese vessels, 7 pots were charged to Soviet vessels, and the other 10 pots could not be attributed with certainty but were believed lost because of Japanese vessels operating in the area.

The severe curtailment of king crab fishing efforts because of the March 27 earthquake damage in Kodiak no doubt reduced the potential for such conflicts. However, another major factor was the apparent avoidance by the Soviets of the areas of king crab pot concentrations. Following formulation of the United States-Soviet gear conflict agreement in late June, Soviet trawlers apparently refrained from fishing in the designated crab pot areas off Kodiak, although the agreement did not enter into force until late last year. In fact, the only pot losses charged to the Soviets occurred within a pot sanctuary area off Kodiak in November--after the agreed upon pot protection period of July through October.

Japanese trawlers, on the other hand, consistently fished within the pot concentration areas as designated by the United States-Soviet agreement, primarily off southwest Kodiak Island. All the pot losses charged to the Japanese occurred within the areas and period designated by the United States-Soviet pact. Of interest were the arrangements made by the Taiyo Fishing Company, through an Anchorage subsidiary, to compensate United States fishermen for king crab pots lost to Japanese trawlers in the Gulf of Alaska.



Created in 1849, the Department of the Interior--a department of conservation--is concerned with the management, conservation, and development of the Nation's water, fish, wildlife, mineral, forest, and park and recreational resources. It also has major responsibilities for Indian and Territorial affairs.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department works to assure that nonrenewable resources are developed and used wisely, that park and recreational resources are conserved for the future, and that renewable resources make their full contribution to the progress, prosperity, and security of the United States--now and in the future.