photo by David G. Sears

Standard Requirements

- *Employment by a permitted observer provider*
- *Bachelor's degree in natural sciences*
- *Thirty semester hours or equivalent in applicable biological sciences with extensive use of dichotomous keys in at least one course*
- *One college level course each in math and statistics*
- *No limitations that will interfere with performance of duties*
- *Competent computer skills*

Permitted Observer Providers

- *Alaskan Observers, Inc.*
  (206) 283 -7310
  www.alaskanobservers.com
- *NWO, Inc.*
  (425) 673 - 6445
  ngrdfobs@aol.com
- *Saltwater Inc.*
  (907) 276 -3241
  www.saltwaterinc.com
- *TechSea International*
  (206) 285 -1408
  www.TechSea.com

For Further Information

National Marine Fisheries Service
North Pacific Groundfish
Observer Program, Bldg. 4
7600 Sand Point Way N.E.
Seattle, WA 98115

(206) 526 - 4078

www.afsc.noaa.gov/refm/observers/default.htm

What is an Observer?

cover photo by Jennifer Ferdinand

photo by Cecelia Green

photo by Jason Phillips

photo by Conor Nolan

What is an Observer?

Fisheries observers are biologists who work independently to collect biological information aboard commercial fishing vessels and at shoreside processing plants in Alaskan waters. This information is used by federal and state agencies in the management of commercial fisheries in the North Pacific. Observers are deployed by private observer providers for up to three months. Prior to each deployment, observers sign a written contract outlining the terms of each employment period. Contracts may vary between observer providers. The job is hazardous and the conditions at sea can be harsh. However, the work is adventurous and observers travel to some of Alaska's most remote areas.

Job Training

Initial preparation consists of a comprehensive three week training program either in Seattle or Anchorage. Curriculum includes safety while at sea, sampling methods, species identification, requirements for data recording and reporting, the basics of fisheries management, pertinent fishing regulations, and life as an observer. Attendance, full participation in exercises, and a passing score on exams are necessary to successfully complete the classroom portion of training. In addition, attendees must be able to don an immersion suit in under one minute, enter the water in an immersion suit, and climb into a floating life raft.

Things to Consider

Working as an observer in Alaskan waters is physically and mentally demanding. Rough seas are common, initial bouts of seasickness are very uncomfortable for many people, and the environment can be cold, wet and unpleasant. Vessel lengths range from 60 feet to over 300 feet. Limited on board space makes living and working conditions relatively cramped. On many vessels fishing takes place 24 hours a day, and while a majority of trips last anywhere from one day to a couple of weeks, some vessels are equipped to go out to sea for longer than a month. The work schedule of an observer follows the vessel's fishing practices and is often erratic and unpredictable, making it impossible to adhere to regular sleeping patterns. A typical day's activities includes heavy lifting (up to 80 pounds), climbing ladders, and working on rolling, slippery decks. There is minimal access to amenities such as phones, computers and mail both on the vessels and at Alaskan fishing ports. In the event of an emergency, advanced medical assistance is not readily available.

Observer Duties

- *Record information on fishing effort, location, and estimate total catch*
- *Sample to determine the species composition of catches*
- *Collect critical biological information such as size frequencies and sex ratios*
- *Collect biological samples*
- *Monitor level of compliance with fishing regulations*
- *Record incidental takes and interactions of marine mammals and seabirds with fishing gear and vessels*
- *Keep a detailed logbook of sampling activities*
- *Complete a post-cruise debriefing*

photo by Eli Coplen