

Common Name: Cook Inlet Population - Beluga Whale



Scientific Name: *Haliotis cracherodii*

Area of Concern: Alaska (Cook Inlet population)

Year First Listed as a “Species of Concern”: 1997

Species Description:

The beluga whale is also known as the white whale because the adult body is all white. Calves are usually blue-grey and lose their color with age. The forehead of the whale, or “melon,” is rounded and flexible. They do not have a dorsal fin, although, a well-developed dorsal ridge is present. Their teeth are deeply rooted but are loose in the alveoli which allows the whale to grasp onto its prey and swallow it whole. Beluga whales feed on animals such as benthic worms and shrimp, red salmon, small chinook salmon, herring, halibut, and smelt. Gestation for pregnant females is estimated to last 14-15 months with a peak of births in late June to mid-July. Length at birth is 1.5-1.6 m (4.921-5.245 ft). Depending on the season, beluga whales occur in the offshore and coastal waters in Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, Norton Sound, Kasegaluk Lagoon and Mackenzie Delta. In the winter, the whales associate with pack ice in offshore waters. In the spring, they migrate to warm estuaries, bays, and rivers to molt and calve. The beluga whale lives in northern temperate, arctic, and subarctic waters which are seasonally covered by ice. During the warmer seasons, beluga whales enter coastal waters.

Rationale for “Species of Concern” Listing:

Demographic and Diversity Concerns:

Of the five stocks of beluga whales in waters under U.S. jurisdiction, four (Beaufort Sea, Eastern Chukchi Sea, Eastern Bering Sea, and Bristol Bay) are generally considered healthy populations. These stocks are likely stable or increasing in size though their status relative to Optimum Sustainable Populations cannot be determined.

Factors for decline

Human-caused mortality, primarily subsistence harvest by Alaska Natives, is within sustainable limits, and no other factors (human or natural) are considered to represent threats to these stocks. The Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales is designated as depleted under the MMPA and is a candidate species under the ESA. Subsistence harvest is the only factor that can be identified as influencing the decline of the population from 1994 to 1998 that prompted the depletion designation. Cook Inlet is highly developed and human activity is expected to increase in the future. Potential human-caused threats include shipping, oil/gas production and transport, indirect and direct adverse effects from commercial fishing, and harassment due to increasing commerce and recreation in the Inlet. None of these potential threats are expected to have a significant adverse impact on the stock at this time.

Status Reviews/Research Completed or Underway: NMFS found in June 2000 that listing the stock as threatened or endangered is not warranted (65 FR 38778; June 22, 2000).

[Further information](#)

For further information on this Species of Concern, or on the Species of Concern Program in general, please contact Ms. Marta Nammack, NMFS, Office of Protected Resources, 1315 East West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910, (301) 713-1401, x180, Marta.Nammack@noaa.gov; or Shannon Fitzgerald, NMFS, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, 7600 Sand Point Way, NE, BIN C15700, Bldg. 4, Rm 2149, Seattle, WA 98115-0070, (206) 526-4553, Shannon.Fitzgerald@noaa.gov.