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### **Western Arctic Bowhead Whale Populations Continue to Increase**

The population of endangered bowhead whales in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas is recovering, scientists with NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) announced today.

The spring 2001 population estimate shows about 9,860 bowhead whales in the western Arctic stock, up from 8,200 when last estimated in 1993. These calculations incorporate the latest bowhead whale abundance estimate with more than two decades of observations.

Bowhead whales are still recovering from extensive whaling between 1848 and 1915. Their population appears to be growing now at about three percent each year. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and NOAA Fisheries co-manage the western Arctic stock of bowhead whales. Eskimo hunters in Alaska take about 40 whales per year to feed people in the villages.

"A three percent recovery rate is very healthy," said whale biologist Dave Rugh of the NOAA Fisheries National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle. "At some point fairly soon, we need to revisit the endangered status of this population."

Beyond carefully managed hunting, hazards to the whales include fishing gear entanglements, ship strikes, oil spills and killer whales. Disease-related risks appear surprisingly low for bowhead whales. But even with these remaining dangers, the population is doing well, he said.

Rugh also pointed out that, "if the ice in the Arctic Ocean continues to thaw, bowheads in the future may be able to navigate through Arctic passes that are currently ice-covered year round. This increases the probability of isolated stocks of whales mixing again, which should be beneficial through increasing genetic variety."

Some bowhead populations, such as those in Davis Strait, Hudson Bay, the North Atlantic, and the Okhotsk Sea, have not shown any significant evidence of recovery from commercial whaling.

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In fact, some whales alive today may have been alive at the end of the commercial whaling period. In recent times, modern whale hunters have found ivory, stone and bone harpoon points in the blubber of newly-caught whales. Modern native hunters have not been using this type of gear, nor have their forefathers as far back as anyone can remember.

The eyes of a bowhead may help determine its age. Craig George of the Department of Wildlife Management in the North Slope Borough in Barrow, explained that aspartic acid in the eye lenses of living animals changes slowly at a predictable rate. George and others have analyzed the eye lenses of bowhead whales harvested by Eskimo hunters.

“Evidence is accumulating that these whales live a very, very long time,” said George. “If estimates are correct, some whales may be over 100 years old.”

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.