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Puget Sound's Killer Whales Get Recovery Plan Proposal, Critical Habitat Designated

The federal agency charged with protecting the nation's marine mammals has issued a proposed recovery plan aimed at restoring Puget Sound's killer whales to healthy levels with the ultimate goal of removing them from their place on the Endangered Species List.

The proposed plan, to be announced tomorrow in the *Federal Register* by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service), outlines an ambitious program that identifies the likely factors in the recent decline of the sound's killer whale population and lays out a recovery program to deal with each of the threats.

The Southern Resident killer whales, as the group is officially known, are separate from other killer whale groups. They appear in Puget Sound typically in May, with some remaining into the fall before most leave for the open ocean in the winter months.

"These spectacular animals are part of Puget Sound's cultural heritage and its ecology," said Bob Lohn, head of the NOAA Fisheries Service Northwest regional office in Seattle. "We have an obligation to see that their population once again thrives."

The whales were listed as "endangered" under the federal Endangered Species Act in late 2005. Today's proposed plan is a requirement of that listing and is based on an earlier draft conservation plan, produced when the whales were officially designated "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 2003. The extensive comment from the general public and the scientific community on the earlier plan helped expedite preparation of today's proposed recovery plan.

The whales' population peaked in the 1990's at 97 animals, then declined to 79 in 2001; the official population count now stands at 90 whales, with several calves born into the population in recent years. However, there have been reports of as many as four whales that have gone missing in the past few months. The next official census will take place this summer.

The Proposed Plan

Today's proposed plan lists a number of factors scientists say are likely responsible for the whale's decline. These include prey availability, pollution, oil spills and the effects of vessel traffic and underwater noise.

The proposed plan suggests a variety of ways to address these issues, including new research, better coordination with other state and federal agencies, clean-up and improved monitoring of contaminated sites in the sound, and better response to rescuing live-stranded animals and determining the cause of death of those that do not survive.

Killer whales, which are actually the world's largest form of dolphin, are found in every ocean. Males, generally larger than females, can reach almost 30 feet at maturity and weigh more than 15,000 pounds.

Critical Habitat Also Designated

In a separate action today, NOAA Fisheries Service announced its final designation of critical habitat for killer whales.

The critical habitat designation encompasses parts of Haro Strait and the waters around the San Juan Islands, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and all of Puget Sound, a total of just over 2,500 square miles. The agency is excluding from the designation 18 military sites covering nearly 112 square miles of habitat.

Federal agencies will now be required to consult with NOAA Fisheries Service to ensure their actions will not destroy or adversely modify the killer whales' designated habitat.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA. NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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