
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

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NOAA04-R411
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Feb. 17, 2004

NOAA ANNOUNCES IMPORTANT NEW HUMPBACK WHALE RESEARCH

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, announced today the start of an ambitious \$3.3 million, three-year project to learn more about the endangered humpback whale. The study is known as "SPLASH"- the Structure of Populations, Level of Abundance and Status of Humpbacks.

It is the most comprehensive study ever attempted of the endangered North Pacific humpback whale population. The effort is a partnership of NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary Program and NOAA Fisheries. It is unprecedented in its international cooperation and geographic scope.

"The results of this study will provide important new information to help NOAA better manage and protect humpback whales and their habitat in the North Pacific," said Richard Spinrad, Ph.D., NOAA National Ocean Service assistant administrator. "Our long-term goal is to recover the species to a viable, self-sustaining population throughout its range."

The humpback whale was listed as an endangered species in 1973. Scientists estimate that the pre-whaling population of the North Pacific stock of the humpback whales was approximately 15,000. In 1992, the last year with a reliable estimate, there were about 7,000. Current assessments indicate that the stock is slowly increasing.

"NOAA Fisheries is pleased to partner with such an incredible group of whale experts to participate in this first-of-its-kind study involving North Pacific Humpback Whales," said Bill Hogarth, Ph.D., assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries. "Hopefully through this study, we can develop more ways to continue rebuilding humpback whale populations."

SPLASH will use consistent sampling efforts in feeding and wintering areas of humpbacks within the North Pacific. Field techniques such as photo-identification and biopsy tissue sampling will be the primary field methods. Research will take place in all known humpback whale habitats throughout the North Pacific from the Bering Sea and Far East Russia south to Mexico and Costa Rica, and west to Hawaii and Asian tropical waters beyond.

"Hundreds of researchers from the U.S., Japan, Russia, Mexico, Canada, Philippines, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala are collaborating to understand the population structure of humpback whales across the North Pacific, and to assess the status, trends and potential human impacts to this population," said Sam Pooley, Ph.D., NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Regional Office acting administrator.

Spinrad said Hawaii is physically and historically at the center of humpback whale research in the North Pacific, and the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary has played a major role helping to pull the project together making Hawaii the logical place to make this announcement. NOAA has overall management responsibilities for the humpback whale under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act.

“Hawaii research is scheduled during the winter season when the whales are here to mate and give birth,” said David Mattila, NOAA Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary researcher and rescue coordinator. “Some surveys have already been conducted in Hawaii in order to catch the early arrivals.” This summer, research will occur in Olympic Coast, Cordell Bank, Gulf of the Farallones, Monterey Bay, and Channel Islands national marine sanctuaries.

SPLASH is supported by NOAA and a variety of organizations. The steering committee for SPLASH includes: NOAA, Interior Department’s National Park Service; Canada Department of Fisheries and Oceans; Instituto Nacional de Ecologia, Mexico; and several academic and research institutions. For a complete story, visit [NOAA Magazine](http://www.noaaneews.noaa.gov/stories2004/s2170.htm) (<http://www.noaaneews.noaa.gov/stories2004/s2170.htm>).

NOAA National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSP) seeks to increase the public awareness of America’s maritime heritage by conducting scientific research, monitoring, exploration and educational programs. Today, the sanctuary program manages 13 national marine sanctuaries and one coral reef ecosystem reserve that encompass more than 150,000 square miles of America’s ocean and Great Lakes natural and cultural resources.

NOAA’s National Ocean Service manages the NMSP and is dedicated to exploring, understanding, conserving and restoring the nation’s coasts and oceans. The National Ocean Service balances environmental protection with economic prosperity in fulfilling its mission of promoting safe navigation, supporting coastal communities, sustaining coastal habitats and mitigating coastal hazards.

NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving the nation’s living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries 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.

The Commerce Department’s NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA National Ocean Service: <http://www.oceanservice.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

HIHWNMS/SPLASH: <http://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov>