
FAQ

August 16, 2011

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The Science Behind the 2011 Walrus Haul-out FAQ

Why is the USGS interested in studying walruses?

The Pacific walrus is one of four marine mammal species managed by the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). The U.S. Geological Survey, as the research arm of DOI, conducts research on walruses to provide information needed for conservation and management of this species.

What is the focus of current USGS research on walruses?

The USGS is conducting research to understand how a rapidly changing arctic ecosystem is affecting key biological resources, including the Pacific walrus. USGS seeks to understand how continued summer sea ice loss affects the walrus population. Toward this end, USGS researchers are attaching satellite radio tags to walruses to study changes in their movements and foraging habits as a consequence of reduced sea ice over the continental shelf.

Why are the walruses hauling out on the Chukchi Sea coastline?

Typically, female walruses and their young forage over the shallow continental shelf of the Chukchi Sea in U.S. and Russian waters throughout the summer, using sea ice as a platform to rest between foraging bouts to the seafloor. Walruses haul out onto the shores of the Chukchi Sea in both Alaska and Russia when sea ice recedes past the continental shelf into the deep waters of the Arctic Basin where walruses are unable to feed effectively.

When and where do the walruses haul out on the Chukchi Sea coastline?

Walruses haul out onto the shores of the Chukchi Sea when the sea ice recedes north of the continental shelf, usually near the end of summer in August and September.

In 2010, walruses came ashore when sea ice began melting in late August. This year, the sea ice has receded earlier and walruses have already begun to come ashore. In 2008, no walruses came ashore in Alaska, because sparse remnant sea ice persisted over the shelf.

Locations used in Alaska include Icy Cape and Point Lay. In Russia, large walrus haul-outs have occurred in the vicinity of Ryrkarpiy, Vankarem, and Cape Serdtse-Kamen on the Chukotka Peninsula.

How do scientists track the walruses as they haul out?

Scientists tag walruses with radio transmitters that transmit data on the walrus's location, and behavior information, to polar orbiting satellites. Tracking information is available online and is updated approximately every week. Tracking information can be found here:

http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/walrus/2011animation_Norseman.html

How are the sea ice conditions compared to past years?

The extent of sea ice is low this year, similar to the past few years.

Do you expect large haul-outs in Alaska as in years past?

It is difficult to say how large any haul-outs in Alaska will be in 2011. In 2007 and 2009, a few thousand walrus came to shore in Alaska. In 2010, a few tens of thousands of walrus came to shore.

Where can I find images of the walrus hauled out and on sea ice?

The USGS Multimedia gallery has several images available for public use:

<http://gallery.usgs.gov/sets/Walrus>

The National Snow and Ice Data Center also provides many ice images and products. <http://nsidc.org/>

Is it possible to view and/or film the walrus haulout?

Walrus are highly sensitive to the sight, sound, and odor of humans and machines and may stampede into the water when disturbed. Disturbance events can result in injuries and mortalities, particularly amongst calves. Aircraft and marine vessels should avoid operating near coastal walrus haulouts. Viewing or filming walrus at coastal haulouts should be done in a manner that allows walrus to remain unaware of human presence. Disturbance of walrus and other marine mammals in U.S. waters is a violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Commercial and educational photographers planning on operating near coastal haulouts should be especially sensitive to the potential disturbance of Pacific walrus, and are encouraged to contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Management Authority for additional guidance. Should you anticipate a need to film Pacific walrus in a manner that could disturb individual animals you can find an application form for a photography permit on-line at: <http://www.fws.gov/forms/3-200-86.pdf>, please be aware that application for a permit may take 60 to 90 days For more information on walrus conservation and management efforts in Alaska, contact the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Marine Mammals Management office at 1 800 896-3075, or visit their website at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm>.

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