

Help Protect Beluga Whales

REWARD UP TO \$2500

For information leading to the conviction of person(s) who violate the Marine Mammal Protection Act or the Endangered Species Act.

It is illegal to hunt or harass Cook Inlet beluga whales, and illegal to collect any parts from a dead beluga whale.

Help us prevent unlawful harassment, chasing, hunting, capturing or killing of these whales to aid recovery of this declining population. This will ensure their presence in Cook Inlet for **future generations**.

Please report suspicious activities by calling:

NOAA Office for Law Enforcement

(907) 271-3021

NOAA Fisheries Hotline

(800) 853-1964

(callers can remain anonymous)

We need and appreciate **Your** help!



If you see a STRANDED whale:

- **DO NOT APPROACH IT!** Not only is it **against the law**, but this is for your safety and for the well being of the whale.
- **IMMEDIATELY CALL** the NOAA Fisheries stranding cell phone during business hours (907-360-3481), the NOAA Fisheries 24 hour stranding hotline (800-853-1964), or the Alaska SeaLife Center's stranding hotline (888-774-7325) and provide the location of the stranded whale or whales.



NOAA FISHERIES

Protected Resources Division
222 W. 7th Ave, Box 43
Anchorage, AK 99513

Phone: 907-271-5006
Fax: 907-271-3030

Cook Inlet Beluga Whales



NOAA FISHERIES



For more information about Cook Inlet Beluga Whales go to:
www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/whales/beluga.htm

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Info

Description

The beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) is a small, toothed whale in the family Monodontidae. Belugas are also known as “white whales” because of the white coloration of the adults (the word “beluga” is derived from the Russian word for white, just as the word *leucas* in the species’ scientific name is the Latin word for white). Calves are born in the summer and remain with their mothers for about 24 months. Calves are born dark gray to brownish gray and become lighter with age. Adults generally become white to yellow-white at sexual maturity. Some Cook Inlet beluga whales may reach 20 feet in length, although the average adult size is more often 12-14 feet. Male belugas are larger than females of the same age; males weigh up to 3,300 pounds and females about 3,000 pounds. Belugas may live 60 or more years.

Abundance and Status

The Cook Inlet beluga whale stock was estimated at 1,300 animals in 1979. Annual abundance surveys conducted by NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) from 1994 to 2007 have resulted in population estimates ranging from a high of 653 animals (in 1994) to a low of 278 animals to (in 2005), with a 2008 abundance estimate of 375 Cook Inlet beluga whales. Aerial surveys documented a 47% decline between 1994 and 1998. In response to this significant decline, NOAA Fisheries designated the Cook Inlet beluga whale stock as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act in May 2000. Surveys between 1999 and 2008 have demonstrated a further decline of 1.45% per year. In October 2008, NOAA Fisheries listed the Cook Inlet beluga whales as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Diet

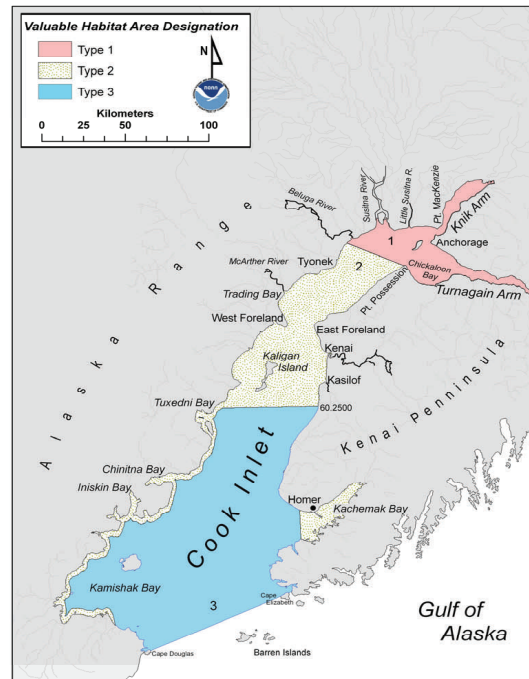
Cook Inlet belugas prey on a wide variety of animals, including octopus, squid, crabs, shrimp, clams, mussels, snails, sandworms, polychaetes, and various fish such as cod, herring, smelt (eg., capelin and eulachon), flounder, sole, sculpin, pollock, lamprey, lingcod and salmon. In the spring, Cook Inlet belugas primarily eat eulachon (a.k.a. hooligan or candlefish), and switch primarily to salmon in the summer. In the fall and winter, when eulachon and salmon numbers are low, belugas diversify their diet and spend more time feeding in deeper waters.

Distribution

Belugas generally occupy shallow, coastal waters, and while some populations make long seasonal migrations, Cook Inlet belugas reside in Cook Inlet year round. Belugas concentrate in the upper Inlet at rivers and bays in the summer and fall, and then tend to disperse offshore and move to mid Inlet waters in the winter. The Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Alaska Natives and aerial survey data show that the summer range of Cook Inlet belugas is shrinking. While belugas were once abundant and frequently sighted in the lower Inlet during spring and summer, they are now primarily concentrated in the upper Inlet. This constriction is likely the result of a reduced population seeking the highest quality habitat that offers the most abundant prey, the most favorable feeding habitat, the best calving areas, and the best protection from predators.

Habitat

While it is difficult to quantify the importance of various habitats in terms of the health, survival, and recovery of Cook Inlet beluga whales, certain areas are likely to be particularly important. Areas where beluga whales concentrate, such as shallow tidal flats, larger river mouths, estuarine areas, and certain areas where the level of human related disturbance is low, provide a necessary combination of physical and biological features that facilitate feeding, breeding, and nursing. Additionally, ice in these regions in the colder months may provide important barriers to beluga predators. For management purposes, NOAA Fisheries has divided Cook Inlet into three regions based



upon patterns of beluga habitat use, and has labeled them as valuable habitat types 1, 2, and 3. Type 1 habitat includes habitats with documented intensive beluga use from spring through fall, and which are important feeding and nursery habitats. Type 1 habitat is clearly the most valuable of the three types based on the frequency of use by Cook Inlet beluga whales. Type 2 habitat is based on less concentrated spring and summer beluga use, and known fall and winter use areas. Type 3 habitat encompasses the remaining portions of Cook Inlet.

Potential Threats

A number of threats may have limited the Cook Inlet beluga population or may be preventing its recovery. Natural factors may include stranding events, predation, parasitism and disease, and environmental change. Human-induced factors may include subsistence harvest, poaching, fishing, pollution, vessel traffic, tourism and whale watching, coastal development, noise, oil and gas activities, and scientific research.

Initially, the sharp decline of the Cook Inlet beluga whale population in the mid-1990s was attributed to overharvest by subsistence users. Since 1999, cooperative efforts between NOAA Fisheries and subsistence users have dramatically reduced subsistence harvests; only five whales have been harvested in Cook Inlet by Alaska Natives since 1999. Data collected during the past several years, however, indicate that the population is not increasing as expected since regulating the subsistence harvests. It is not known what specific factor or combination of factors continue to limit this population’s growth.

Conservation

NOAA Fisheries has already implemented several management measures in an effort to curb the decline of the Cook Inlet beluga population. Such measures include regulating subsistence harvests; developing a stranding response plan and a law enforcement plan; cooperating with other agencies to develop oil spill contingency plans; and regularly reviewing proposed state and federal permits and actions that may affect Cook Inlet beluga whales.

While much has been done to improve our knowledge of Cook Inlet beluga whales, there are still gaps in our knowledge and understanding which preclude a definitive analysis of factors limiting their recovery and which hinder effective management actions.