U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Record Sea Ice Retreat

Walrus Conservation and Management Issues in the Chukchi Sea

Summary

The shallow continental-shelf waters of the Chukchi Sea experienced a rapid and complete retreat of sea ice during the summer of 2007. Pacific walruses, which are normally associated with drifting pack ice in the offshore environment during the summer months, began coming to shore in late July as the sea ice retreated from the continental shelf. Large herds of walruses have been reported at several locations along the Chukchi Sea coast. Open water conditions are likely to persist in the Chukchi Sea until early November. Prolonged open water seasons in the Chukchi Sea can be expected to become increasingly common according to most predictive climate models.

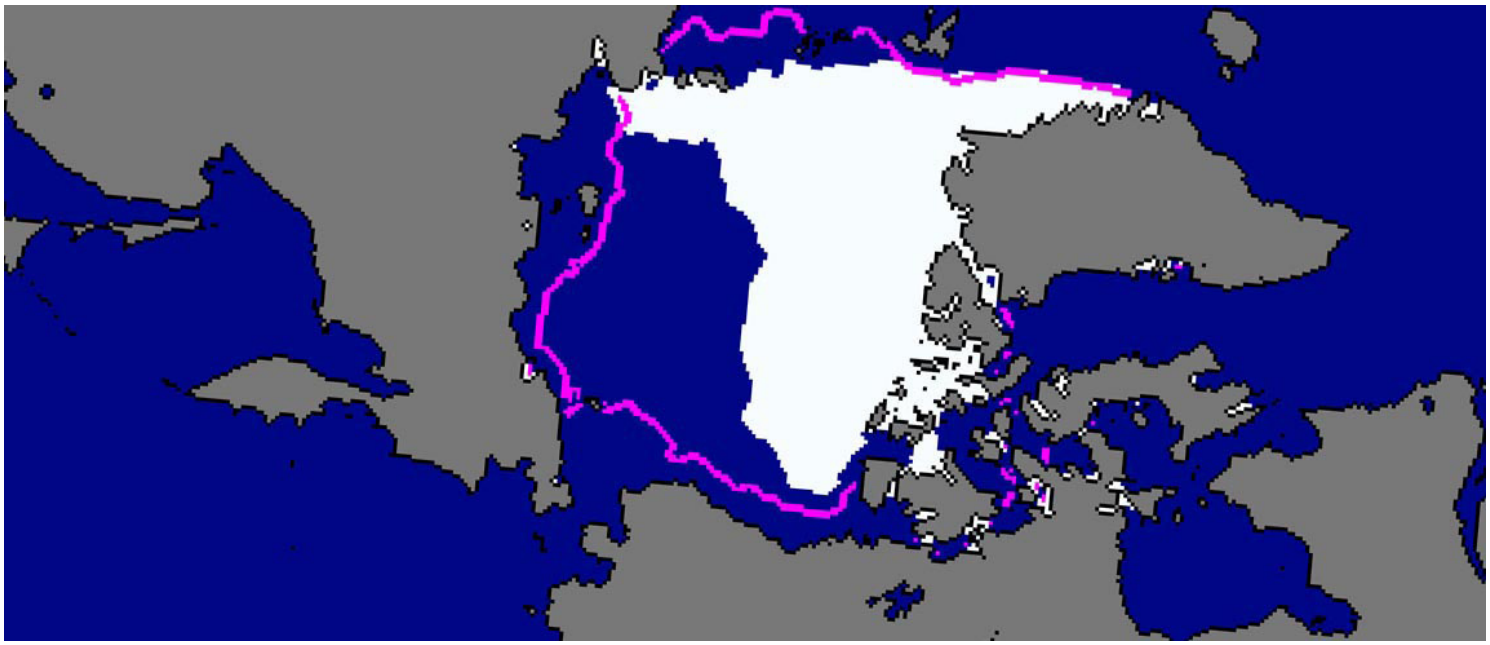
Conservation concerns and management issues

Walruses, particularly females with dependent calves, are poorly adapted to life in the open sea. They rely on broken pack ice as a platform for resting between feeding bouts, for nursing dependent young, and for shelter against stormy seas. When suitable pack ice is not available, walruses must come ashore to rest. When doing so, walruses often "haul out" in large groups. Such animals are sensitive to disturbances, and may stampede back into the water when disturbed. Large-scale mortality events have occasionally resulted from herd stampedes, with calves being particularly vulnerable to trampling injuries as a result of disturbance events. Frequent disturbances may also impact animal health and condition if walruses are unable to obtain sufficient rest between feeding excursions.

Although the Chukchi sea coastline is sparsely populated, the potential for disturbance resulting from passing aircraft and subsistence hunting activities along the coast is of concern. Interactions with sightseers have also been reported at accessible beaches at Barrow, Alaska. The Service is working with various partners in efforts to minimize the frequency and intensity of human disturbances to walruses resting along the Chukchi sea coastline during the 2007 open water season.

Management responses

Monitoring - Monitoring the size, location and duration of coastal walrus aggregations along the Chukchi Sea coast through the 2007 season will help inform current and future management actions. The Service has partnered with Shell Offshore, Inc. to carry out weekly aerial surveys documenting walrus aggregations along the Chukchi Sea coast through mid-October. We are also developing plans to carry out supplemental monitoring efforts if necessary.



Courtesy of National Snow and Ice Data Center, 2007.

Average Arctic sea ice extent for the month of September 2007. The magenta line indicates the long-term median September sea-ice coverage from 1979 to 2000.

Courtesy of LGL and Shell Offshore Inc. 2007.

A herd of walruses resting along the Chukchi Sea coast.

Coordination and outreach - The Service has been working closely with many partners as we continue to respond to emerging walrus conservation and management issues in the Chukchi Sea.

■ The Eskimo Walrus Commission helped organize meetings in local communities to exchange information regarding walrus conservation issues and to identify ways to minimize disturbances to resting walruses through the open water season.

■ The North Slope Borough, Department of Wildlife has been responding to reports of walruses on Barrow beaches and coordinating efforts to minimize the disturbance of these animals.

■ The Federal Aviation Administration has notified local pilots and air-charter companies of the sensitivity of walrus groups to disturbances from low flying aircraft, and has requested pilots maintain a minimum flight altitude of 1,000 feet when flying near coastal walrus aggregations.

■ Local media outlets have carried Public Service Announcements requesting public support and cooperation in minimizing disturbances to walruses along the coast.

Research

Research leading to a better understanding of the long term implications of diminishing pack ice in the Chukchi Sea on the Pacific walrus population is needed to inform future management decisions and actions. The US Geological Survey, Alaska Science Center is leading research efforts to investigate walrus distributions, habitat use patterns, and responses to changing environmental conditions.

USFWS

For more information on walrus management activities in Alaska contact:

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Visit the Marine Mammals Management home page:
http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/wmain.htm