

BELUGA WHALE (*Delphinapterus leucas*): Cook Inlet Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Beluga whales are distributed throughout seasonally ice-covered arctic and subarctic waters of the Northern Hemisphere (Gurevich 1980) and are closely associated with open leads and polynyas in ice-covered regions (Hazard 1988). Depending on season and region, beluga whales may occur in both offshore and coastal waters, with concentrations in Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, Norton Sound, Kasegaluk Lagoon, and the Mackenzie Delta (Hazard 1988). During spring and summer months, beluga whales in Cook Inlet are typically concentrated near river mouths in the northern Inlet (Rugh et al. 2000). Although the exact winter distribution of this stock is unknown, there is evidence that some, if not all, of this population may inhabit Cook Inlet year-round (Fig. 19; Hansen and Hubbard 1999, Rugh et al. 2000). Satellite tags have been attached to 17 belugas in late summer in order to determine their distribution through the fall and winter (Hobbs et al. 2005). Ten tags lasted through the fall and of those, three lasted through the winter. The three tags that transmitted through the winter stopped working in April and late May. No tagged beluga moved south of Chinitna Bay on the west side of Cook Inlet. A review of all cetacean surveys conducted in the Gulf of Alaska from 1936 to 2000 discovered only 31 sightings of belugas among 23,000 sightings of other cetaceans, indicating that very few belugas occur in the Gulf of Alaska outside of Cook Inlet (Laidre et al. 2000). A small number of beluga whales (fewer than 20 animals; Laidre et al. 2000, O’Corry-Crowe et al. 2006) also occur in Yakutat Bay; these are currently considered part of the Cook Inlet stock (65 FR 34590; 31 May 2000).

The following information was considered in classifying beluga whale stock structure based on the Dizon et al. (1992) phylogeographic approach: 1) Distributional data: geographic distribution discontinuous (Frost and Lowry 1990); 2) Population response data: possible extirpation of local populations; distinct population trends between regions occupied in summer; 3) Phenotypic data: unknown; and 4) Genotypic data: mitochondrial DNA analyses indicate distinct differences among summering areas (O’Corry-Crowe et al. 2002). Based on this information, 5 stocks of beluga whales are recognized within U. S. waters: 1) Cook Inlet, 2) Bristol Bay, 3) eastern Bering Sea, 4) eastern Chukchi Sea, and 5) Beaufort Sea.

POPULATION SIZE

Aerial surveys for beluga whales in Cook Inlet have been conducted by the National Marine Fisheries Service each year since 1993. Starting in 1994, the survey protocol included paired, independent observers so that the number of whale groups missed can be estimated. When groups were seen, a series of aerial passes were made to allow each observer to make independent counts at the same time that a video camera was photographing the whale group (Rugh et al. 2000).

The annual abundances of beluga whales in Cook Inlet are estimated from counts by aerial observers and aerial video group counts. Each group size estimate is corrected for subsurface animals (availability correction) and animals at the surface that were missed (sightability correction) based on an analysis of the video tapes (Hobbs et al. 2000b). When video counts are not available, observer’s counts are corrected for availability and sightability using a regression of counts and an interaction term of counts with encounter rate against the video group size estimates

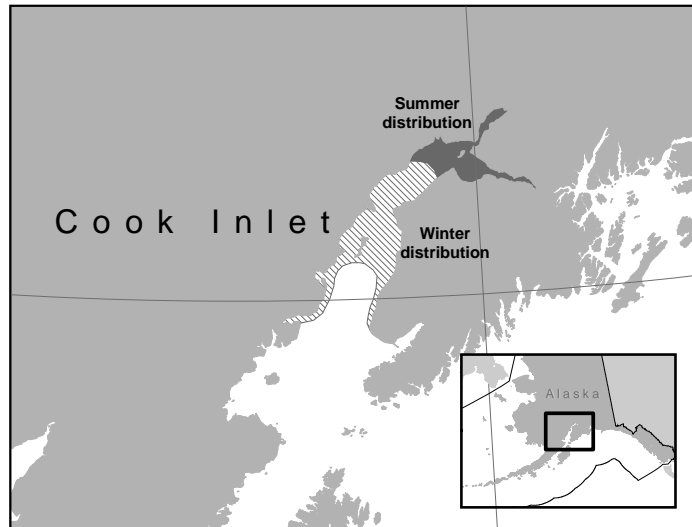


Figure 19. Approximate distribution of beluga whales in Cook Inlet. The dark shading displays the summer distribution. Winter distribution is depicted with dashed shading.

(Hobbs et al. 2000b). The most recent abundance estimate of beluga whales in Cook Inlet, resulting from the 2007 aerial survey is 375 (CV = 0.21) animals (NMFS unpubl. data). While this estimate is larger than the estimates of 278 for 2005 and 302 for 2006, it is equivalent to the average of 370 for the years 1999-2004.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population size (N_{MIN}) for this stock is calculated according to Equation 1 from the PBR Guidelines (Wade and Angliss 1997): $N_{MIN} = N / \exp(0.842 \times [\ln(1 + [CV(N)]^2)]^{1/2})$. Using the population estimate (N) of 375 and its associated CV(N) of 0.21, N_{MIN} for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales is 314.

Current Population Trend

The corrected abundance estimates for the period 1994-2007 are shown in Figure 20. A statistically significant declining trend in abundance was detected between 1994 and 1998 (Hobbs et al. 2000a), although the power was low due to the short time series. A Bayesian inference on the population size estimates for 1994-2005 gave a modal estimate of the current trend of -1.2% per year, with a 71% probability that the population is declining (Lowry et al. 2006). A trend line fit to the estimates for 1999 to 2007 estimates an average rate of decline of 2.8% per year (SE = 0.0161) which is not significantly different from a constant population level at the 5% level. A recent review of the status of the population indicated that there is a 65% chance that the population will decline further (Hobbs et al. 2006).

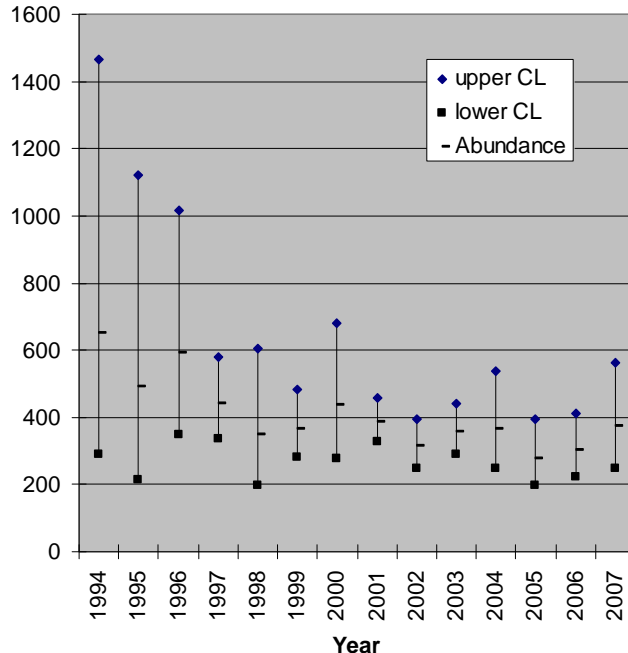


Figure 20. Abundance of beluga whales in Cook Inlet, Alaska 1994-2007 (Rugh et al. 2005, NMFS unpublished data). Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate is currently not available for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales. Hence, until additional data become available, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be employed for this stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 reauthorized Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the potential biological removal (PBR) is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} + 0.5R_{MAX} + F_R$. The F_R and PBR for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whale were both undetermined in Small and DeMaster (1995). In reports from 1998 through 2005, NMFS calculated a value for PBR. However, given the low abundance relative to historic estimates and low known levels of human caused mortality since 1999 this stock should have begun to grow at or near its maximum productivity rate, but for unknown reasons the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whale does not appear to be increasing. Because this stock does not meet the assumptions inherent to the use of the PBR, NMFS cannot determine a maximum number that may be removed while allowing the population to achieve OSP. Thus, the PBR is undetermined for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whale.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

In 1999 and 2000, observers were placed on Cook Inlet salmon set and drift gillnet vessels because of the potential for these fisheries to entangle beluga whales. No mortalities or serious injuries were observed in either year (Manly 2006).

Based on a lack of observed and reported mortalities, the estimated minimum mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is zero belugas per year from this stock.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

Subsistence harvest of beluga whales in Cook Inlet has been important to local villages. Between 1993 and 1999, the annual subsistence take ranged from 30 to over 100 animals (Mahoney and Sheldon 2000). The average annual subsistence harvest for 1995 and 1996 was 87 whales.

Following a significant decline in Cook Inlet beluga whale abundance estimates between 1994 and 1998, the Federal Government took actions to prevent further declines in the abundance of these whales. In 1999 and 2000, Public Laws 106-31 and 106-553 established a moratorium on Cook Inlet beluga whale harvests except for subsistence hunts by Alaska Natives conducted under cooperative agreements between NMFS and affected Alaska Native organizations. There were no signed co-management agreements in 1999, 2004, and 2007, so no harvest was authorized. Harvest from 2001 through 2004 was conducted under harvest regulations (69 FR 17973, 6 April 2004) following an interim harvest management plan developed by the Alaska Native organizations and NMFS. Three belugas were harvested in Cook Inlet under the interim harvest plan (2001-2004; Table 24). In August 2004 an administrative law judge hearing occurred to determine a long-term harvest plan. The recommended decision allows a total of 8 whales to be harvested between 2005 and 2009, followed by the use of a table of allowable harvest levels from 2010 until recovery. This table would set harvest levels dependent on the previous 5-year periods for an average abundance and previous 10-year period to determine the growth rate (increasing, stable, or decreasing). No harvest would be allowed if the 5-year average abundance dropped below 350 beluga. NMFS has set the 2007 harvest to zero because the previous 5-year average abundance estimates was below the 350 animal threshold. Harvest levels for 2008 and subsequent years will be decided after public review of the Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Subsistence harvest Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (72 FR 73798, December 28, 2007).

Table 24. Summary of the Alaska Native subsistence harvest from the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales, 2003-2007.

Year	Reported total number taken	Reported number harvested	Estimated number struck and lost
2003	0	0	0
2004	0	0	0
2005	2	2	0
2006	0	0	0
2007	0	0	0
Mean annual take (2003-2007)	0.4		

OTHER MORTALITY

Mortalities related to stranding events have been reported in Cook Inlet (Table 25). Since improved recordkeeping was initiated in 1994, there are more reports of stranded belugas in Cook Inlet, including live strandings. These live strandings resulted in suspected mortalities of 5 animals in 1996, 5 animals in 1999, and 5 animals in 2003 (Vos and Shelden 2005) and 1 animal in 2005 (NMFS 2007). Many of the live strandings occurred in Turnagin Arm. Because Turnagin Arm is a shallow, dangerous waterway, it is not frequented by motorized vessels, and thus it is unlikely that the strandings resulted from human interactions on the water. Another source of mortality in Cook Inlet is killer whale predation. Killer whale sightings were rare in the upper Inlet prior to the mid-1980s, but have increased and include 18 reported sightings from 1985 to 2002 (Shelden et al. 2003). The three most recent predation events that occurred in the upper Inlet were 1) in September 1999 in which the outcome was unknown, 2) in September 2000 that involved two lactating females that subsequently died (Shelden et al. 2003), and 3) in 2003 where a male stranded (Vos and Shelden 2005).

Table 25. Cook Inlet beluga strandings investigated by NMFS (Vos and Shelden 2005; NMFS unpublished data). * Harvested beluga are not included in the number dead. ** Many belugas that strand do not die. Although some mortalities may have been missed by observers, and animals may die later of stranding-related injuries, the majority of animals involved in a stranding event often survive.

Year	Total Dead of Natural or Unknown Cause	Number of Belugas per Live Stranding Event* (associated known mortalities)
1994	7	186 (0)
1995	2	N/A
1996	12	63(0), 60(4), 25(1), 1(0), 15(0)
1997	3	N/A
1998	10	30(0), 5(0)
1999	15	58(5), 13(0)
2000	13 (2 killer whale)	8(0), 15-20(0), 2(0)
2001	10	N/A
2002	13	N/A
2003	20 (1 killer whale)	2(0), 46(5), 26(0), 32(0), 9(0)
2004	13	N/A
2005	7	7(1)
2006	8	12(0)
2007	13	N/A
Total	146	615-620 (16)

STATUS OF STOCK

An analysis of available data on the population size and dynamics of the Cook Inlet beluga whale stock led NMFS to conclude that this stock is currently below its OSP level. Thus, this stock was designated as “depleted” under the MMPA (65 FR 34590; 31 May 2000). NMFS also made a determination that this stock should not be listed under the ESA at the time (65 FR 38778; 22 June 2000) primarily because the subsistence harvest, which appeared to have been responsible for the majority of the decline, was regulated in 1999 through an act of Congress. Once the subsistence harvest was regulated (65 FR 38778; 22 June 2000), the rapid decline in the stock slowed (Hobbs et al. 2000a). However, there has been a lack of recovery, and the most recent analysis suggests that the population is declining slowly. Two Cook Inlet commercial fisheries that could have incurred incidental serious injuries or mortalities of beluga whales were observed in 1999 and 2000, and no takes of beluga whales were observed. At present, annual U. S. commercial fishery-related mortality levels can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. Because the PBR for this stock is undetermined, it is not possible to say whether or not the annual level of human caused mortality (0.4) exceeds the PBR. Because the Cook Inlet beluga whale stock has been designated as “depleted” under the MMPA, it is classified as strategic. In 2006 NMFS published a review of the status of this population (Hobbs et al. 2006). In April 2007, NMFS proposed listing Cook Inlet beluga as endangered under the ESA (72 FR 19854). A final determination on this action is due in April 2008.

Efforts to develop co-management agreements with Alaska Native organizations for several marine mammal stocks harvested by Native subsistence hunters across Alaska, including belugas in Cook Inlet, have been underway for several years. An umbrella agreement on co-management among the Indigenous People’s Council for Marine Mammals, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and NMFS was signed in August 1997, and an updated co-management agreement was signed in October 2006. During 1998, efforts were initiated to formalize a specific agreement between local Alaska Native organizations and NMFS regarding the management of Cook Inlet belugas, but without success. Federal legislation was implemented in May 1999, placing a moratorium on beluga hunting in

Cook Inlet except under cooperative agreements between NMFS and affected Alaska Native organizations. Co-management agreements between NMFS and the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council have since been signed for 2000-2003 and 2005-2006.

Habitat Concerns

Observation and tagging data both indicate that the northernmost parts of upper Cook Inlet, including the Susitna Delta, Knik Arm, and Chickaloon Bay, are the focus of the stock's distribution in both summer (Rugh et al. 2000; Goetz et al. 2007) and winter (Hobbs et al. 2005). Because of the very restricted range of this stock, Cook Inlet beluga can be assumed to be vulnerable to human-induced or natural perturbations within their habitat. Although the best available information indicated that human activities, including oil and gas development, had not caused the stock to be in danger of extinction as of 2000 (65 FR 38778; 22 June 2000), potential effects of human activities on recovery remain a concern. Additional concerns which have the potential to impact this stock or its habitat include changes in prey availability due to climate changes; competition with fisheries for available prey; contaminants and sounds associated with oil and gas exploration; vessel traffic; waste management and urban runoff; and physical habitat modifications that may occur as upper Cook Inlet becomes increasingly urbanized (Moore et al. 2000, Lowry et al. 2006). Projects planned that may alter the physical habitat include a highway bridge across Knik Arm, ferry operations in lower Knik Arm, construction and operation of a coal mine near Chitna, and improvements to the Port of Anchorage.

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