

Pacific Walrus

Questions and Answers

Where is the Pacific walrus found?

The Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) is found throughout the Arctic continental shelf waters of the Bering and Chukchi Seas and can be found in low numbers in the East Siberian Sea and the Beaufort Sea.

During spring, most of the population, including females and calves, migrates from the Bering Sea into the Chukchi Sea, where they form mixed groups along the southern edge of the pack ice. As summer sea ice recedes, walrus may haul out on shore on Wrangel Island in the Russian Federation and other islands and along the Chukchi Sea coast. The number of walrus using coastal haulouts in Chukotka, Russia is highly variable among years and seasons. Many adult males remain in the Bering Sea for the summer, using coastal haulout sites in the Gulf of Anadyr, Russian Federation, the Bering Strait region, and in Bristol Bay, Alaska. In the fall, walrus follow the formation of sea ice as they migrate south from the Chukchi Sea through the Bering Strait and back into the Bering Sea.

What is the current status of the Pacific walrus population?

The current size and trend of the Pacific walrus population is unknown. Between 1975 and 1990, cooperative aerial surveys were carried out by the United States and the former Soviet Union at five-year intervals, producing population estimates ranging from about 170,000 to 250,000 animals. Observers counted or estimated numbers of walrus hauled out on pack ice and land but could not accurately count the number of walrus that were swimming in the water. Efforts to survey the Pacific walrus population were suspended by both countries after 1990 due to unresolved problems with survey methods. Technological advances, including thermal imaging systems and satellite transmitters led to a joint U.S. Russia survey in 2006. Analysis of that data is ongoing and final results are expected in late 2009.

How does the Pacific walrus use sea ice?

The Pacific walrus uses floating sea ice as a substrate for birthing and nursing calves, resting, isolation from predators and for passive transport to new feeding areas. Pacific walrus also use terrestrial haul outs located in close proximity to areas suitable for feeding. Walrus feed on a broad array of prey, including sea anemones, worms, sea cucumbers, tunicates, snails and clams and occasionally fish, birds or seals. Although capable of diving to deeper depths, walrus usually feed in shallow waters of 100 meters (328 feet) or less.

Is it legal to harvest Pacific walrus?

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) provides for the legal harvest of walrus by Alaska Natives for subsistence purposes, including the making of handicrafts. Current harvest levels are thought to be sustainable. If this situation changes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will work closely with the Eskimo Walrus Commission and walrus

hunting communities to determine the best approach to maintaining sustainable harvests in Alaska.

What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking today?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced that a petition, filed on February 8, 2008, to list the Pacific walrus as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that listing the Pacific walrus may be warranted. This finding is based, in part, upon projected changes in sea ice habitats associated with climate change. As a result, the Service is initiating a 12-month status review to determine if the species should be proposed for listing and is opening a 60-day public comment period in order to give all interested parties an opportunity to provide information on the status of the Pacific walrus throughout its range.

The word “endangered” as defined under the Endangered Species Act refers to a species in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. The word “threatened” refers to a species that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. For more information on the Endangered Species Act petition process visit: <http://www.fws.gov/home/feature/2006/petitionprocess.pdf>

Will there be an opportunity to provide input as the Service conducts this status review?

Yes. To ensure that the 12-month status review is comprehensive, the Service is soliciting scientific and commercial information regarding the Pacific walrus, including;

- Information relevant to the factors described in the Endangered Species Act for making a listing determination which include 1) present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of the species’ habitat or range; 2) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, educational purposes; 3) disease or predation; 4) inadequate existing regulatory mechanisms; or 5) other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.
- The historical and current status of the population, including distribution, abundance, trends in abundance, population dynamics, taxonomy, and stock structure;
- Habitat selection and use, including both sea-ice and terrestrial haulouts, disturbance at haul-outs, food habits, and effects of disease, competition, and predation on Pacific walruses;
- The effects of climate and environmental changes, sea ice changes, and ocean acidification on the distribution, abundance, and life history of Pacific walruses and their principal prey over the short and long term; and
- Information on the effects of other potential threat factors, including, but not limited to, oil and gas exploration and development, commercial fishing and shipping, contaminants, hunting, and ongoing conservation measures for the species and its habitat on the distribution and abundance of Pacific walruses and their principal prey over the short and long term.

How can I submit information?

Information must be submitted by November 9, 2009.

You may submit information by one of the following methods:

- *Federal eRulemaking Portal*: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for docket FWS-R7-2009-0051 and then follow the instructions for submitting comments.
- *U.S. mail or hand-delivery*: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R7-2009-0051; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

We will post all information received on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

Where can I get additional information?

You can get a copy of the petition at:

http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/mammals/Pacific_walrus/PDFS/CBD-Pacific-walrus-petition.pdf

To view the Federal Register 90-day finding and get more information, visit

<http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/wmain.htm>, or contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's

Marine Mammals Management office at

1011 East Tudor Road

Anchorage, AK 99503

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