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Protected Resources

Endangered Species Updates
and Marine Mammal Hot Topics

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NPFMC Meeting
April 2025

Overview

- Species and stocks in Alaska
- Focus on marine mammals listed under the Endangered Species Act
 - Current status
 - ESA actions: Critical Habitat, Recovery Plan, 5-Year Review
 - Threats
 - Fishery Interactions
 - Current management and research
- Additional marine mammal hot topics for NMFS in Alaska

Marine mammal species and stocks in Alaska

(as described in the 2023 NMFS Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Reports)

	Total	Pinnipeds	Cetaceans
Species	25	8	17
Stocks	52	20	32
Stocks with Alaska Native subsistence harvest*	23	18	5
Stocks with U.S. commercial fisheries serious injury or death*	22	12	10
Stocks with both fisheries and subsistence takes*	11	11	0

*stocks with ≥ 0.5 individuals taken on average per year

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*)



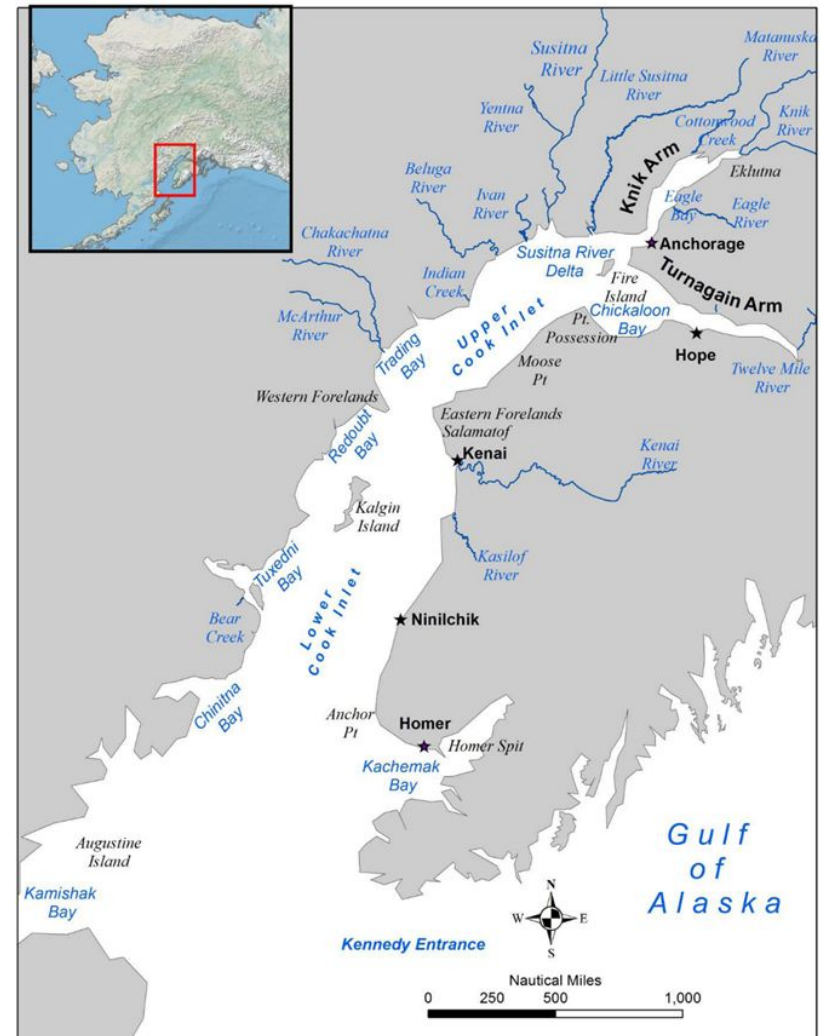
Distribution: Cook Inlet, Alaska

Live year-round in the inlet,
with distribution influenced by
seasonal fish runs

Population Size:

331 (95% CI: 290-386)¹

¹Goetz et al. 2023



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Cook Inlet Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

Endangered Species Act

- Cook Inlet DPS - Endangered
- Recovery Plan? Yes
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2022



Photo Credit: Paul Wade, NOAA Fisheries

Threats & Interactions

- Threats: catastrophic events (e.g., oil spill), noise, cumulative effects, disease, habitat loss/degradation, reduction in prey, predation, pollution, unauthorized take, subsistence hunting
- Fisheries gear interactions: some animals have confirmed or potential entanglement scars (McGuire et al. 2020)
- Current actions:
 - Petitions
 - Petition to Cap Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Take Authorizations
 - Petition for a Rulemaking to Establish a Cook Inlet Beluga Protection Zone in Tuxedni Bay, Alaska



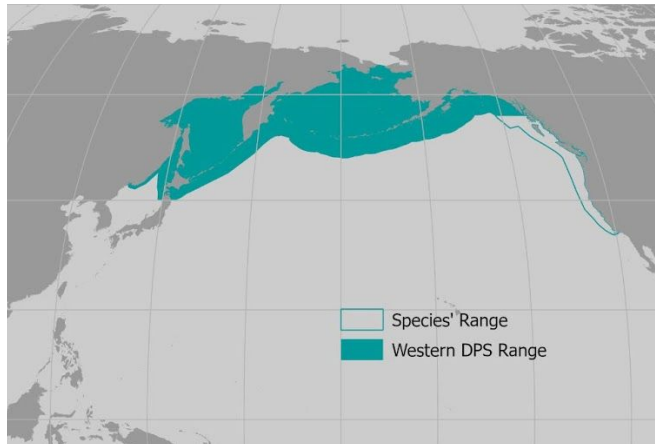
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Western Distinct Population Segment (DPS) Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*)



Western DPS (endangered) - west of 144° W. long. & mixing zone in northern SE AK

Eastern DPS (delisted in 2013) - east of 144° W. long.



U.S. Population Size (2024 survey: Sweeney et al. 2025):

- **Non-pups: 39,774** (95% CI 36,626-43,078)
- **Pups: 12,953** (95% CI 11,996-13,990)

High variability among regions

Negative impacts from the Heatwave

- Continued **significant decline** of non-pups ($-5.67\% \text{ y}^{-1}$) and pups ($-4.07\% \text{ y}^{-1}$) in western Aleutian Islands
- Continued **significant decline** in western region of central Aleutian Islands
- Non-pups in western GOA 2009-2024 **now stable** (had been increasing as of 2021)
- Non-pups in the eastern GOA region **significantly declined** & pups stable between 2009-2024 (non-pups had been stable & pups had been increasing as of 2021)



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Western DPS Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*)

Endangered Species Act

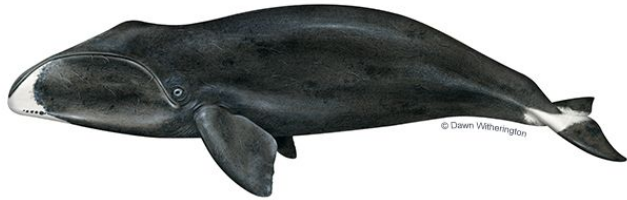
- ESA Status: Endangered
- Recovery Plan? Yes
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2020 (2025 Review in progress)



Threats & Interactions

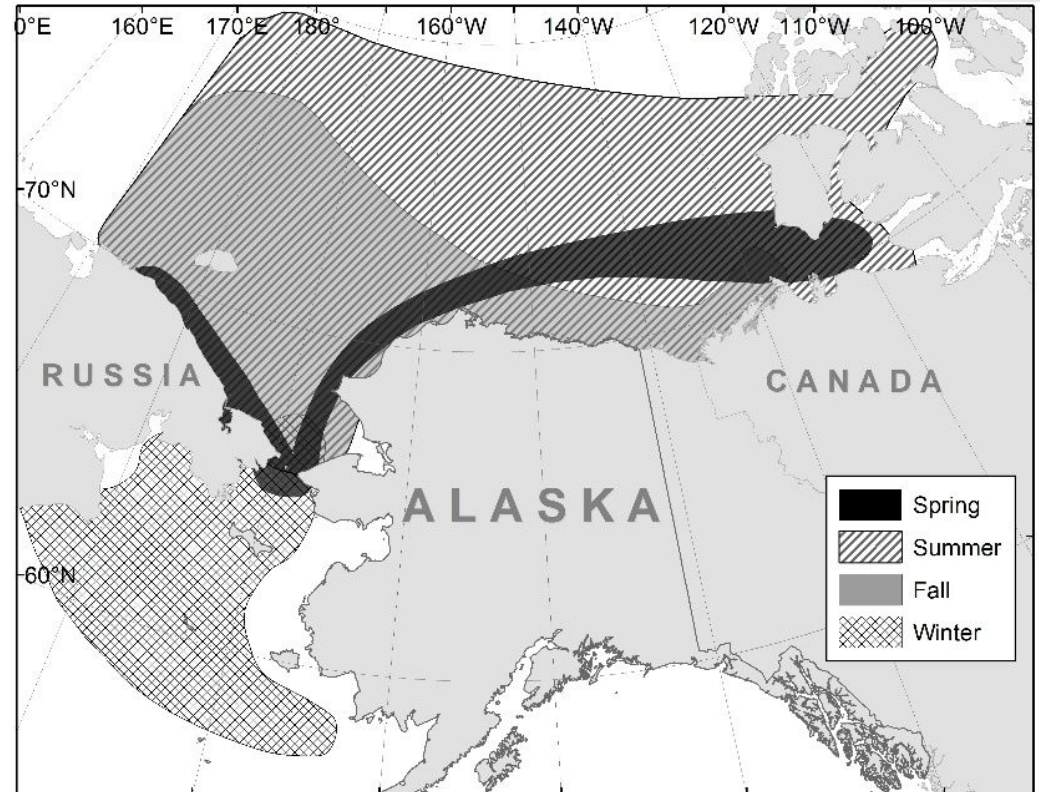
- Threats: Effects of fisheries on prey, environmental variability (climate change, heat waves), predation, disease, contaminants, entanglement, illegal shooting
- Fisheries gear interactions: trawl, longline, salmon hook & line, gillnet
- Current management & research focus: abundance, vital rates (reproductive rates and survival), contaminants, disease, entanglement, deterrents, illegal shooting, illegal feeding

Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)



Four stocks world wide,
only one in U.S. waters, the
Western Arctic Stock

Population Size for Western
Arctic Stock: 17,175



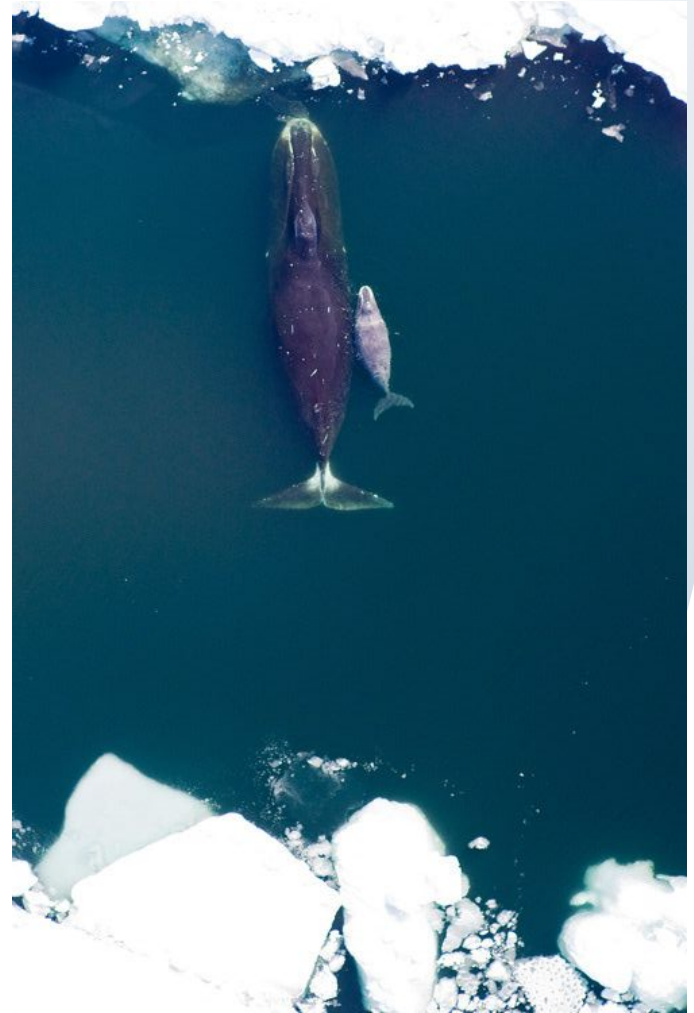
Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Threatened
- Recovery Plan? No
- Critical Habitat: No
- Last 5-Year Review: Rely on IWC's reviews

Threats & Interactions

- Threats: environmental changes
- Fisheries gear interactions: pot fishery gear
- Current management & research focus: abundance estimate (aerial survey planned for summer 2025)



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North Pacific Right Whale (*Eubalaena japonica*)

Two Stocks:

- Eastern and Western Pacific



Population Size:

- Eastern - 31

(95% confidence interval 23-54; based on Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands individuals only)

- Western - unknown, likely in the hundreds



North Pacific Right Whale (*Eubalaena japonica*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Endangered
- Recovery Plan? Yes
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2024



Threats & Interactions

- Threats: vessel strikes; environmental changes
- Fisheries gear interactions: unknown, potentially pot gear
- Current management & research focus: abundance estimate, habitat use and movement patterns, considering revision of critical habitat

Arctic Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida hispida*)

Population Size:

- Chukchi Sea - 592,577 (95% CI: 478,448 - 733,929; Boveng et al. 2024)
- Remainder of Range - unknown, anticipated in the hundreds of thousands or more



Arctic Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida hispida*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Threatened
- Recovery Plan? In progress
- Critical Habitat: No*
- Last 5-Year Review: 2024



Threats & Interactions

- Threats: climate change, habitat loss due to sea ice decline
- Fisheries gear interactions: infrequent; some in BSAI flatfish and pollock trawls
- Current management & research focus: abundance estimate, harvest monitoring, population structure

*September 26, 2024, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska vacated the critical habitat designations for ringed seal and bearded seals under the ESA and remanded the rules to NMFS for further consideration (*State of Alaska v. Nat'l Marine Fisheries Serv.*, Case No. 3:23-cv-00032-SLG (D. Alaska Sept. 26, 2024)).



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Beringia Distinct Population Segment (DPS) Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus nauticus*)

Bearded seals have a circumpolar distribution; the Beringia Stock is the only stock that occurs in US Waters.

Population Size: Unknown;
Nmin= 273,676



Beringia DPS Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus nauticus*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Threatened
- Recovery Plan? In progress
- Critical Habitat: No*
- Last 5-Year Review: In progress

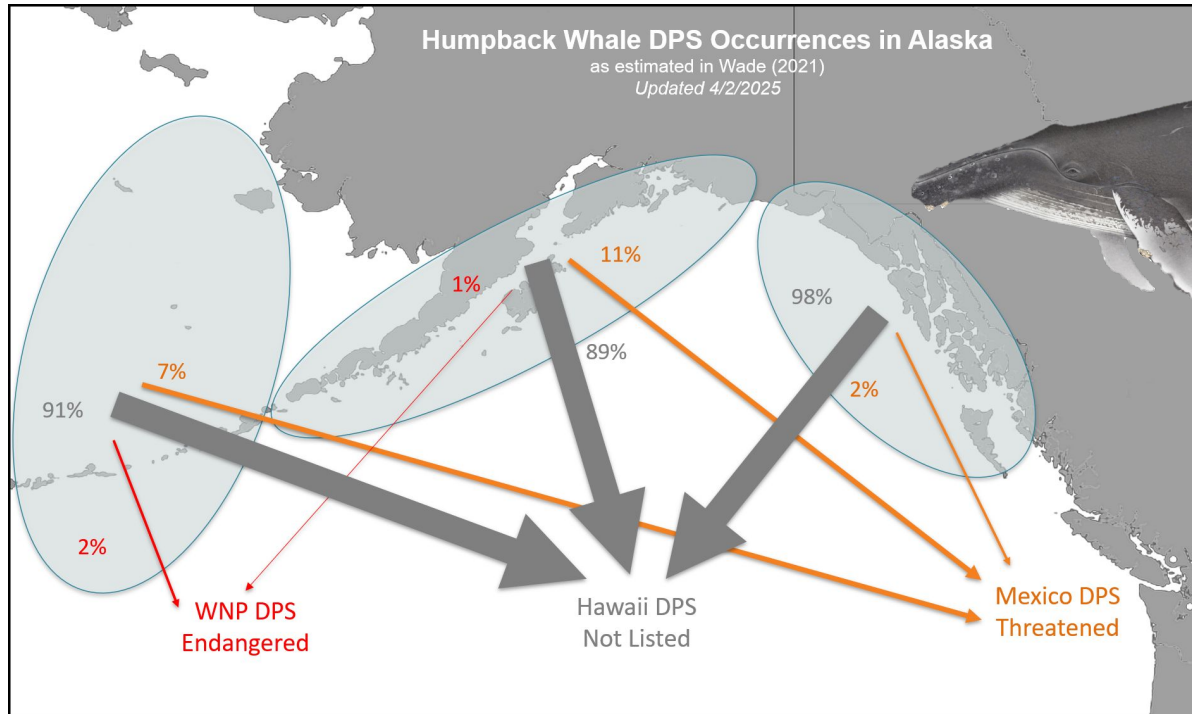
Threats & Interactions

- Threats: climate change, habitat loss due to sea ice decline
- Fisheries gear interactions: infrequent; some in BSAI flatfish and pollock trawls
- Current management & research focus: distribution and abundance estimates, passive acoustic monitoring, stock structure



*September 26, 2024, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska vacated the critical habitat designations for ringed seal and bearded seals under the ESA and remanded the rules to NMFS for further consideration (*State of Alaska v. Nat'l Marine Fisheries Serv.*, Case No. 3:23-cv-00032-SLG (D. Alaska Sept. 26, 2024)).

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)



Western North Pacific

- ESA - Endangered
- Stock = DPS
- Population estimate of stock N= 1,084

Hawaii

- ESA - Not listed
- Stock = DPS
- Population estimate of stock N= 11,278

Mexico

- ESA - Threatened
- Stock = Mexico-North Pacific; a subsection of the DPS
- Population estimate of stock N= 2,352

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: DPS specific
- Recovery Plan? Yes, update in progress
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: Update in progress

Threats & Interactions

- Threats: entanglement, vessel strikes, prey availability, ocean noise, vessel-based harassment
- Fisheries gear interactions: pots, gillnet, especially vulnerable to fixed gear
- Current management & research focus: abundance estimates, food limitations



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Hot Topics: Killer Whales

Increased KW bycatch in trawl in Alaska

- Increasing in recent years
- Spike in 2023

2023

- 9 Flatfish Trawl (A80)
- 1 Pollock Trawl (AFA)

Of these:

- 6 Killed by gear
- 3 Previously dead
- 1 Seriously injured

Recent Updates

- In 2024, A80 deepwater flats trawl fishers implemented a gear modification (i.e. “Whale Fence”) to physically prevent killer whales from entering the net mouth
- 2024 - reduced KW bycatch to 1 take by A80 fleet (none in other trawl fisheries)
- Continued improvements and testing of the gear modification to continue



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Hot Topics: Fur Seals and Fisheries Interactions

- NMFS and Tribal Co-managers exploring threats analysis project and implementing other high priority conservation actions in Northern Fur Seal Conservation Plan
- AFSC/AEP/UW have two manuscripts in the works:
 - “Current and future habitat suitability of northern fur seals and overlap with the commercial walleye pollock fishery in the eastern Bering Sea” (Movement Ecology, in press)
 - “Interactions between fisheries removals and predation by a central place forager, the northern fur seal” (draft manuscript) using CEATTLE multispecies stock assessment integration of northern fur seals
- Future project: UW graduate student building a dynamic energy budget model to integrate fur seals into CEATTLE for future projections



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Hot topics: Marine Mammal Harvest Eligibility

- Hunting marine mammals for subsistence and handicrafts plays a crucial role in Alaska Native history, culture, and food security.
- Determining harvest eligibility based on a minimum 25% Alaska Native blood quantum has been a concern for many years and has been taken up by different organizations at different points.
- NMFS and FWS are each reviewing requirements for Alaska Native marine mammal harvest eligibilities under the MMPA.
- Eligibility requirements under the MMPA have not and will not change until FWS and NMFS develop implementing guidance or complete a rulemaking process.
- <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/agency-statement/update-continuing-process-clarify-marine-mammal-harvest-eligibility>



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Questions?



NOAA Fisheries/Josh M London



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Request for feedback

- Was this level of information helpful?
- What additional information would be helpful?

