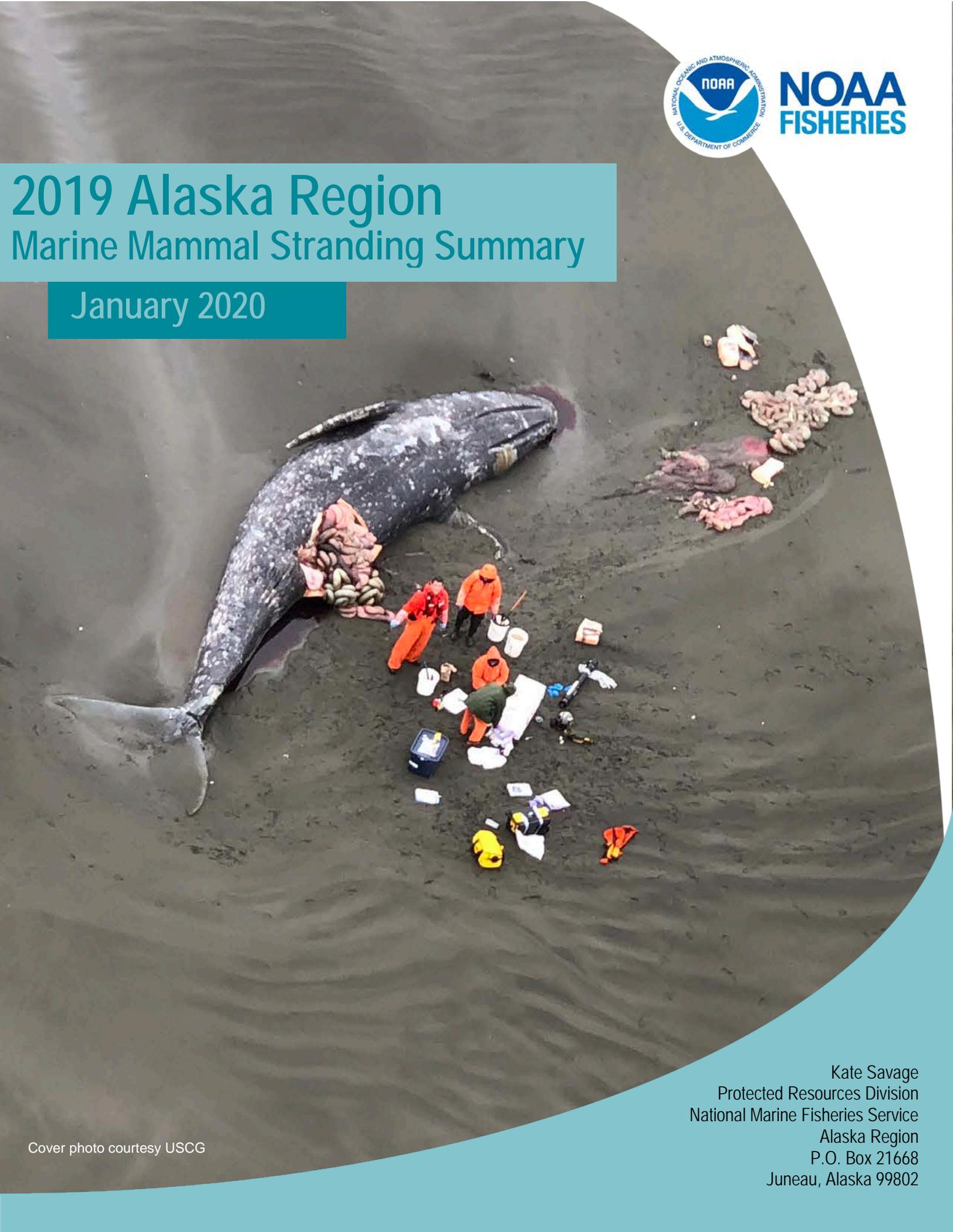




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2019 Alaska Region Marine Mammal Stranding Summary

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Cover photo courtesy USCG

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A. Stranding report description and acknowledgement

Strandings of cetaceans (whales) and pinnipeds (seals and sea lions) that occurred in Alaskan waters and were reported to the National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Region (NMFS) in 2019 are summarized here. Stranding events cover animals found dead (floating and beached), and also reports of live stranded, mass stranded, abandoned, sick, or injured animals. Strandings include all marine mammals under NMFS jurisdiction. Marine mammal species managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (polar bear, sea otter, and walrus) are not included. Reports are made by expert members of the marine mammal community as well as members of the general public with varying degrees of knowledge regarding marine mammal biology and ecology. The extent to which reported stranded animals have been examined is variable, from no examination to the performance of a full necropsy and analysis of pathology. Known subsistence takes are not included nor are fishery observer reports unless the animal was observed outside of statistical reporting protocols (and thus would not be included by the observer program as part of their watch data set). Variability in historic numbers between annual reports may reflect the addition of new reports or changing criteria for reports that are included as strandings. Not all reports of injured marine mammals are considered strandings and entered into Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program's (MMHSRP) National Stranding Database. As of 2017, stranding reports no longer include entanglements or vessel strikes, unless the event resulted in mortality or a response was deemed necessary. Instead, reports of live entanglements or vessel strikes are collected regionally and assessed separately (pages 10 - 13). Further information on criteria for strandings in this summary may be found at:

www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/levela/examiners_guide_2017.pdf

All of the reports included have been confirmed, which means they are accompanied by some level of verification. Reports involving human interaction, such as ship strikes, fishery interactions/entanglements, and firearm injury, are also included with a high level of confirmation.

Further stranding information and references are available at the NMFS Alaska Region webpage: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/marine-life-distress/alaska-marine-mammal-stranding-network>

This summary is made possible by the greatly appreciated efforts of the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network, along with partner organizations, agencies, and members of the public who have reported stranding events to NMFS throughout the year.

B. Stranding reports by year and month.

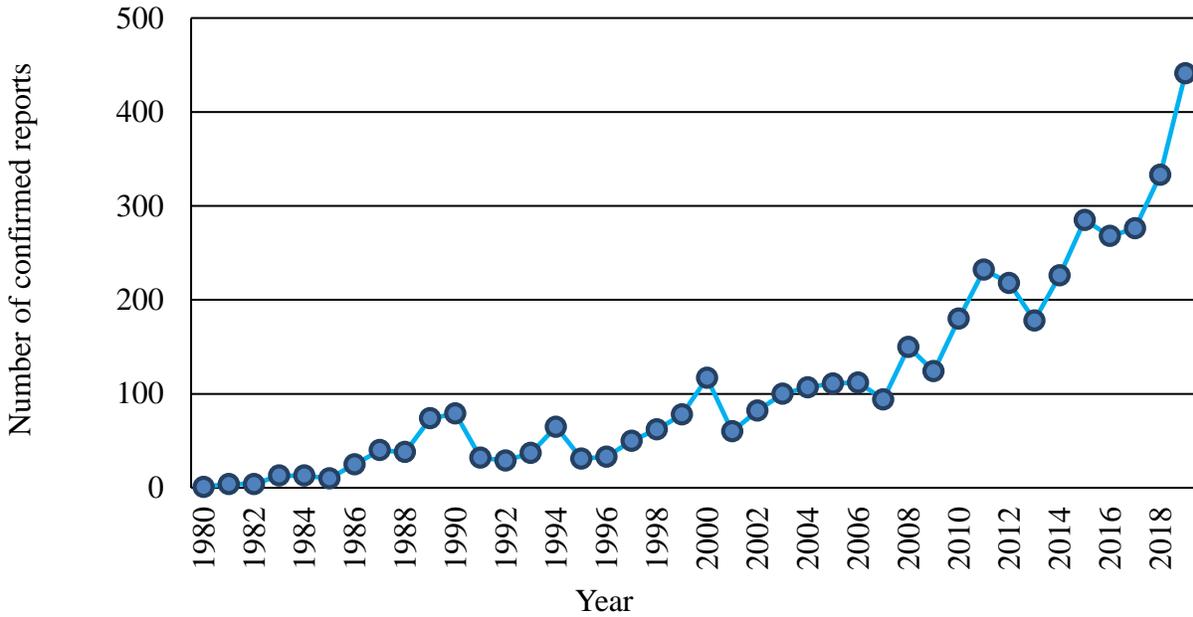


Figure 1. Number of confirmed stranding reports by year, 1980 – 2019.

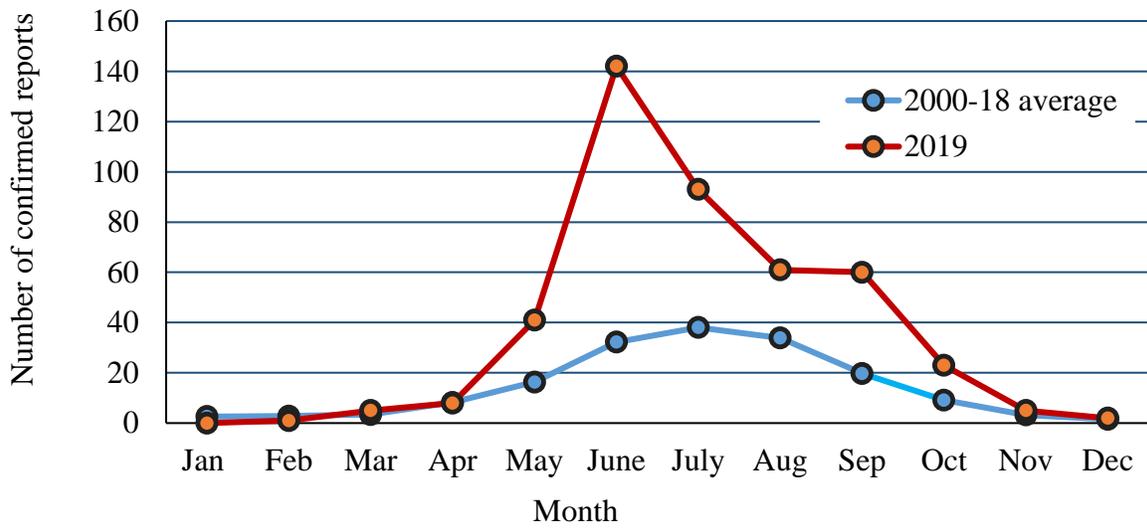


Figure 2. Number of confirmed stranding reports by month, 2019 compared to the 2000-2018 average.

C. Stranding reports by order and species.

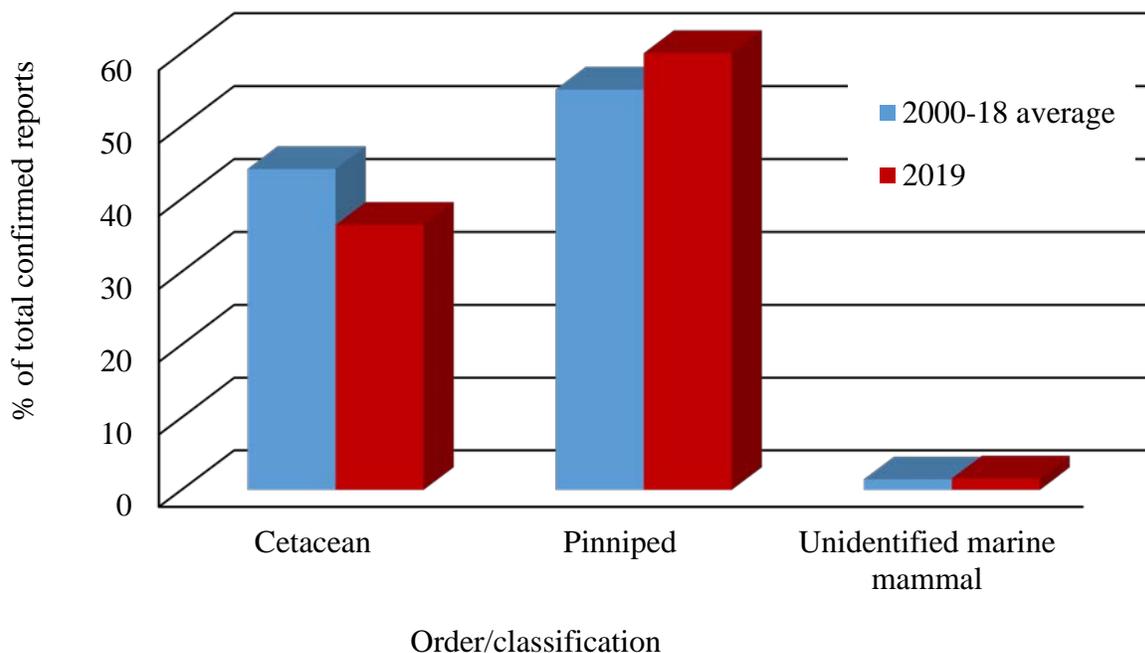


Figure 3. Contribution of confirmed cetacean, pinniped, and unidentified marine mammal reports to total reports, 2019 compared to the 2000-2018 average.

Table 1. Contribution of cetacean species to total confirmed reports, 2019 compared to the 2000-2018 average.

Species	Number of annual reports		Percent of total annual reports		
	2019	2000-2018 average	2019	2000-2018 average	Range
Gray whale	48	12	10.9	7.2	0 - 40.5
Unidentified cetacean	42	13	9.5	7.5	1.7 - 15.6
Beluga whale - other	15	8	3.4	4.4	0.4 - 17.1
Beluga whale - Cook Inlet	13	9	2.9	5.2	1.8 - 41.3
Humpback whale	13	12	2.9	7.1	0.9 - 13.8
Harbor porpoise	11	6	2.5	3.5	0 - 8.8
Bowhead whale	11	3	2.5	1.5	0 - 4.9
Dall's porpoise	3	2	1.3	0.8	0 - 4.3
Sperm whale	1	1	0.2	0.9	0 - 4.3
Minke whale	1	1	0.7	0.8	0 - 4.3
Bairds beaked whale	1	0	0.2	0.2	0 - 2.8
Blue whale	1	0	0.2	0.0	0 - 0.4

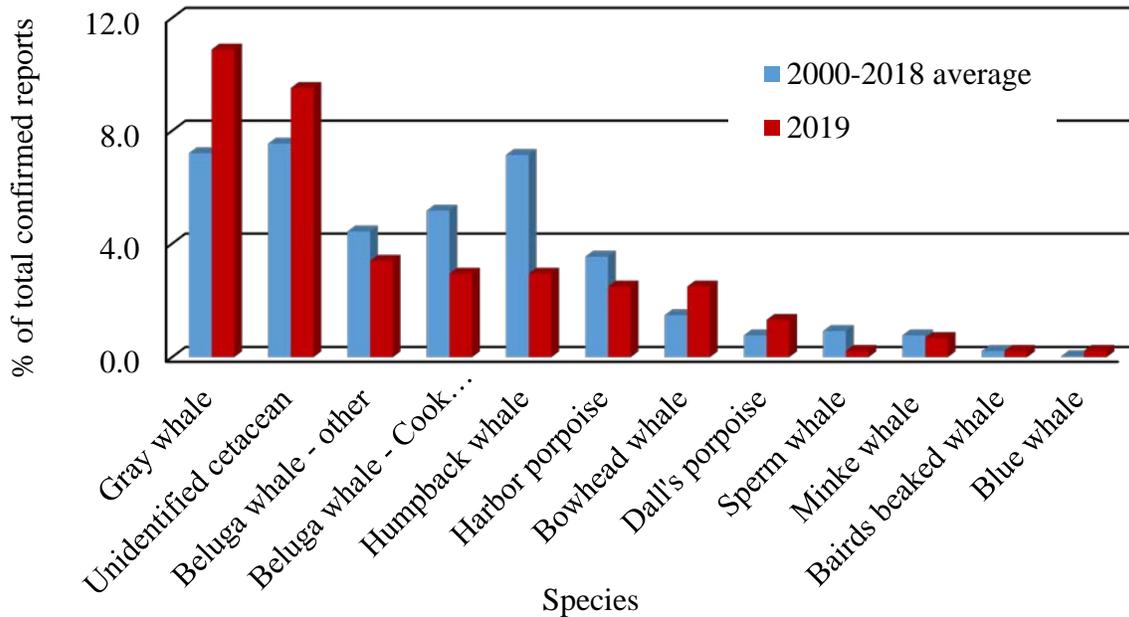


Figure 4. Contribution of cetacean species to total confirmed reports, 2019 compared to the 2000-2018 average.

Table 2. Contribution of pinniped species to total confirmed reports, 2019 compared to the 2000-2018 average.

Species	Number of annual reports		Percent of total annual reports		
	2019	2000-2018 average	2019	2000-2018 average	Range
Unidentified pinniped	55	12	12.5	7.1	0 - 16.9
Steller sea lion	53	29	12.0	16.7	8.7 - 28.8
Bearded seal	50	7	11.3	4.2	0 - 11.4
Ringed seal	38	14	8.6	8.2	0.9 - 41.5
Harbor seal	32	24	7.3	14.0	7.3 - 23.4
Spotted seal	26	4	5.9	2.1	0 - 6.6
Northern fur seal	18	3	4.1	1.9	0 - 15.5
Elephant seal	2	1	0.5	0.3	0 - 2.2
Ribbon seal	1	0	0.2	0.2	0 - 1.1

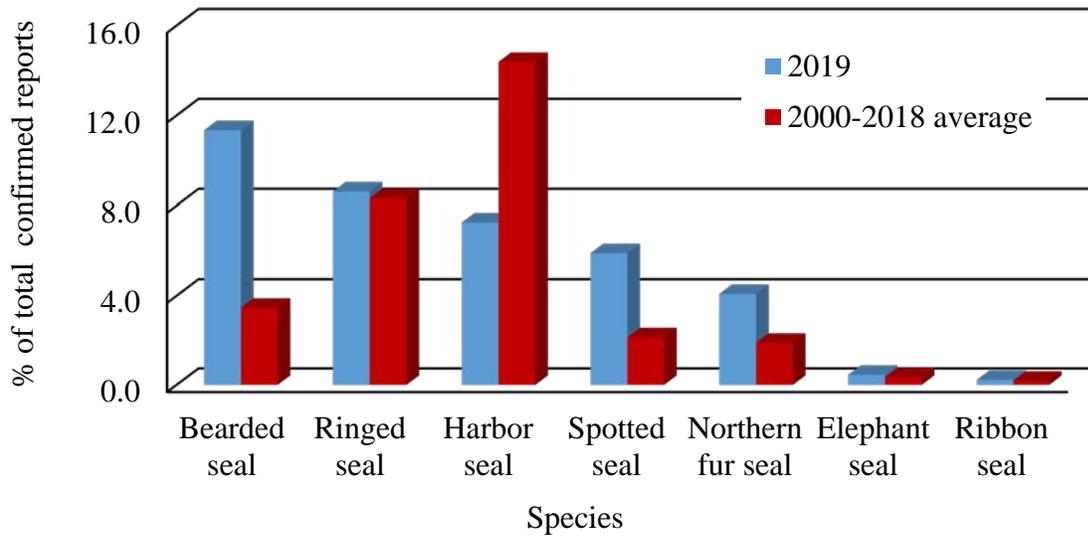


Figure 5. Contribution of pinniped species to total confirmed reports, 2019 compared to the 2000-2018 average.

D. Stranding reports by initial presentation

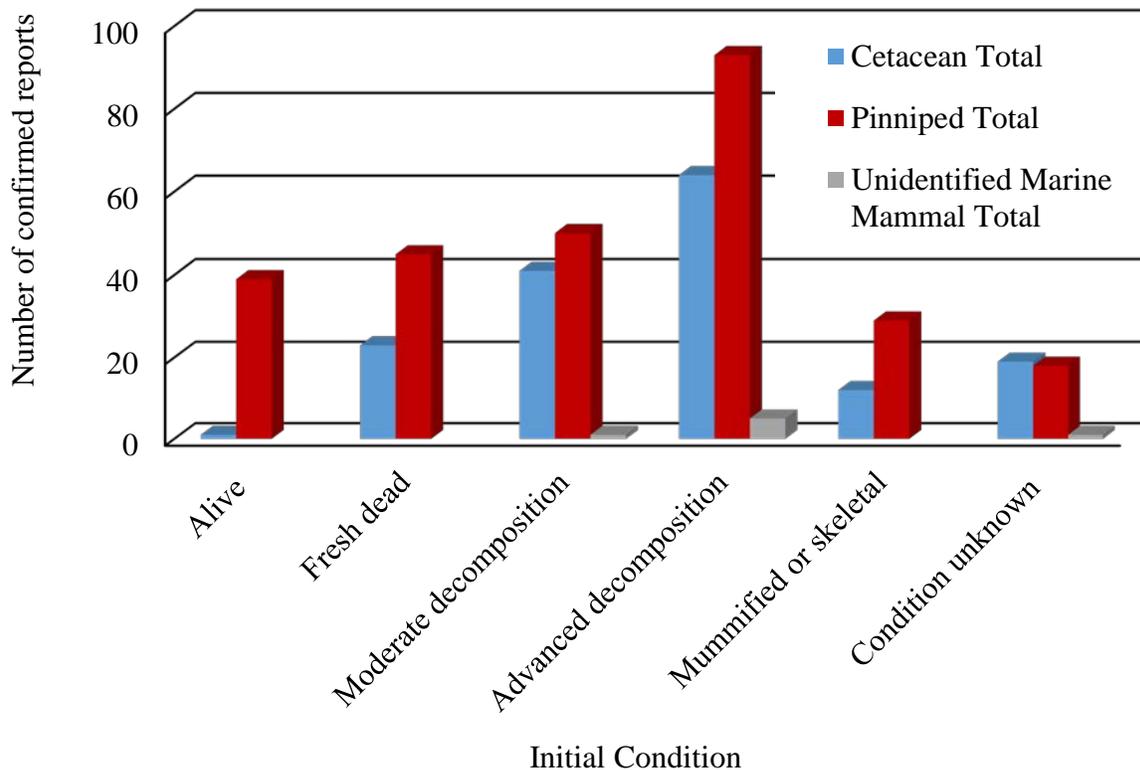


Figure 6. Number of confirmed stranding reports in 2019 by initial condition.

Table 3. Number of confirmed standings reported in the Alaska Region in 2019 by initial condition, species, and number of animals.

Species	Initial Condition					
	Alive	Fresh dead	Moderate decomposition	Advanced decomposition	Mummified or skeletal	Condition unknown or variable
Unidentified cetacean		2	4	19	10	7
Humpback whale	1	2	3	5		2
Gray whale		9	14	20	1	4
Beluga whale - other		1	4	6		4
Beluga whale - CI		1	8	3		1
Harbor porpoise		6	2	3		
Stejneger's beaked whale						
Cook Inlet beluga whale						
Bowhead whale		1	5	5		
Dall's porpoise		1				
Sperm whale				1		
Baird's beaked whale			1			
Blue whale				1		
Minke whale				1	1	1
<i>Cetacean Total</i>	1	23	41	64	12	19
Ringed seal	3	5	9	19	1	1
Bearded seal	1	3	17	23	4	2
Steller sea lion	2	19	11	17	2	2
Harbor seal	9	10	5	5	2	1
Unidentified pinniped		2	1	23	19	10
Spotted seal	4	5	7	7	1	2
Northern fur seal	18					
Ribbon seal	1					
Northern elephant seal	1	1				
<i>Pinniped Total</i>	39	45	50	94	29	18
Unidentified marine mammal			1	5		1
<i>Unidentified marine mammal Total</i>			1	5		1

E. Reports by Location

Table 4. Number of confirmed strandings reported in the Alaska Region in 2019 by subarea and species.

Species	Arctic	Bering Sea	Southcentral	Gulf of Alaska	Southeast	Total
Unidentified pinniped	27	26	2			55
Steller sea lion		6	14	13	20	53
Bearded seal	30	20				50
Gray whale	12	14	2	18	2	48
Unidentified cetacean	14	13	4	10	1	42
Ringed seal	30	8				38
Harbor seal		4	15	3	10	32
Spotted seal	12	14				26
Northern fur seal		18				18
Beluga whale - other	1	14				15
Humpback whale	2	2	2	5	2	13
Beluga whale- CI			13			13
Harbor porpoise		6	1	1	3	11
Bowhead whale	11					11
Unidentified marine mammal	4	2	1			7
Minke whale	1	2				3
Northern elephant seal			1	1		2
Dall's porpoise					1	1
Sperm whale					1	1
Ribbon seal		1				1
Blue whale					1	1
Baird's beaked whale		1				1
Total	144	151	55	51	40	442

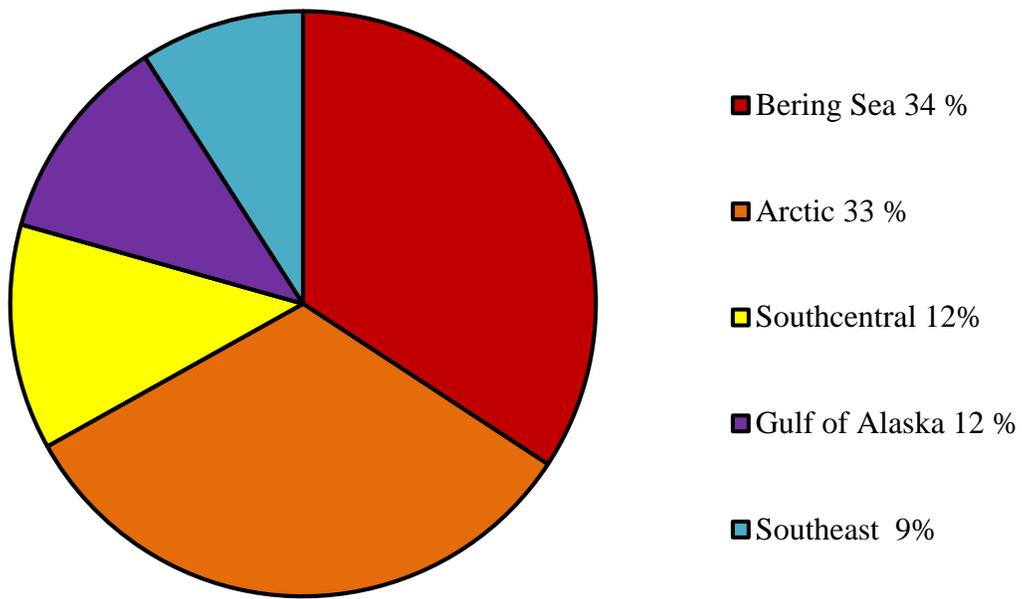


Figure 7. 2019 confirmed stranding reports by subarea.

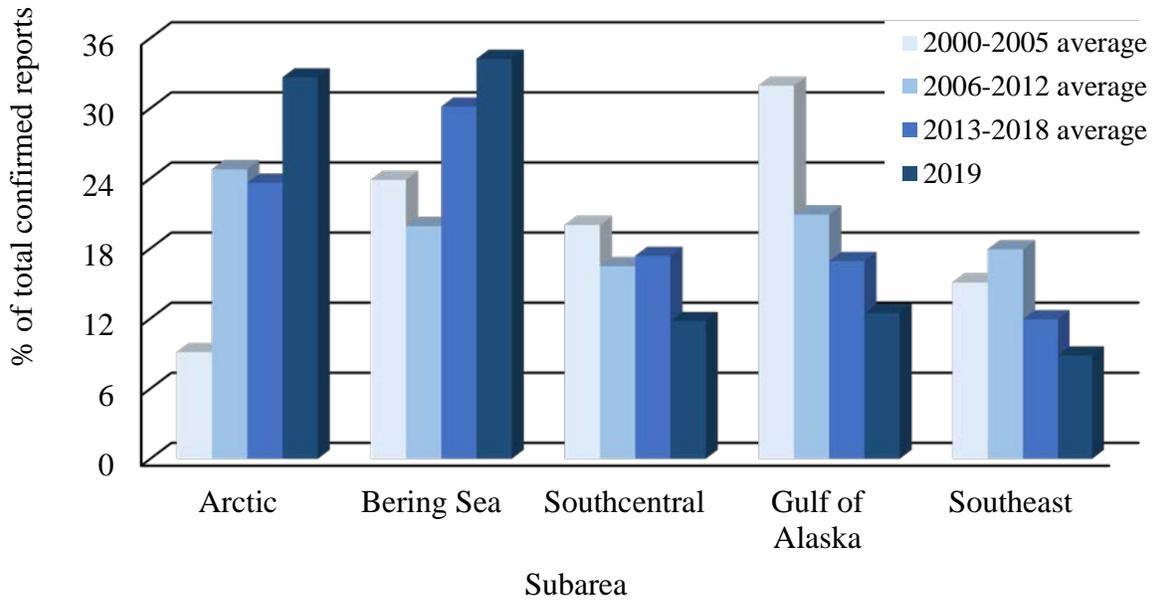


Figure 8. Contribution of regional subareas to confirmed stranding reports over time.

F. Reports involving human interaction

There is a wide range in species susceptibility to human interaction due to life history and geographical overlap. The most common human interactions in stranding reports are entanglements. These include interactions in which marine mammals either become entangled in fishery gear, ingest fishing gear, or interact with marine debris. Other human interactions include ship strikes, where vessels collide with animals either foraging or traversing; and firearm injuries, where harmful interaction is intentional. All reports that NMFS receives are assessed for human interaction. A report is deserving of a “no human interaction” classification only if completely examined. If a complete examination is not possible, human interaction is classified as “could not be determined”. NMFS also received many reports because of an observed human interaction. The incidence of these events is greater than the number recorded in the MMHSRP’s National Stranding Database as only events that result in mortality or a response are recorded as strandings. For example, there are far more reports of live entangled Steller sea lions than of sea lions either reported dead from entanglements or for which a response has been mounted, but only the latter two qualify as strandings and are entered into the MMHSRP national database. All reports of human interaction, regardless of whether they are classified as strandings, are tracked by NMFS Alaska Region and are included below. Human interactions associated with orphaned/abandoned animals are included in reports from the Alaska SeaLife Center, the only rehabilitation facility in the region, on page 13.

Table 5. 2019 confirmed reports involving human interaction by species and as a percentage of all reports.

Species	Human Interaction (HI)					Total HI	Total annual reports**	% HI
	Entanglement	Vessel strike	Firearm injury (suspected or confirmed)	Picked up and released or transferred to ASLC	Other			
Northern fur seal	31					31	31	100
Harbor seal			3	9	1	13	32	41
Steller sea lion	6		11		2	19	59	32
Humpback whale	9	5				14	26	54
Beluga whale - other	1					1	15	7
Harbor porpoise		1				1	11	9
Unidentified cetacean	1					1	43	2
Sperm whale		1				1	1	100
Bearded seal				1		1	50	2
Northern elephant seal				1		1	2	50
Ringed seal				3		3	38	8
Spotted seal				2		2	26	8
Total	48	7	14	16	3	88	176	40

**These include all reports received for the species, including reports of stranded animals where evidence of human interaction was either not present or could not be determined and all reports of human interaction

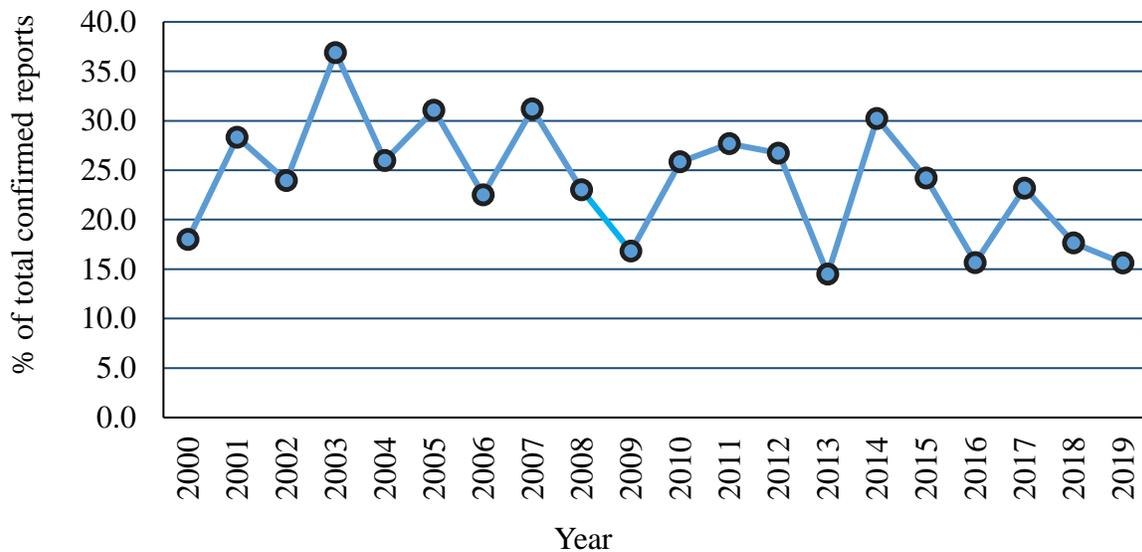


Figure 9. Percentage of total confirmed reports involving human interaction (entanglement, vessel strike or firearm injury) by year, 2000 – 2019.

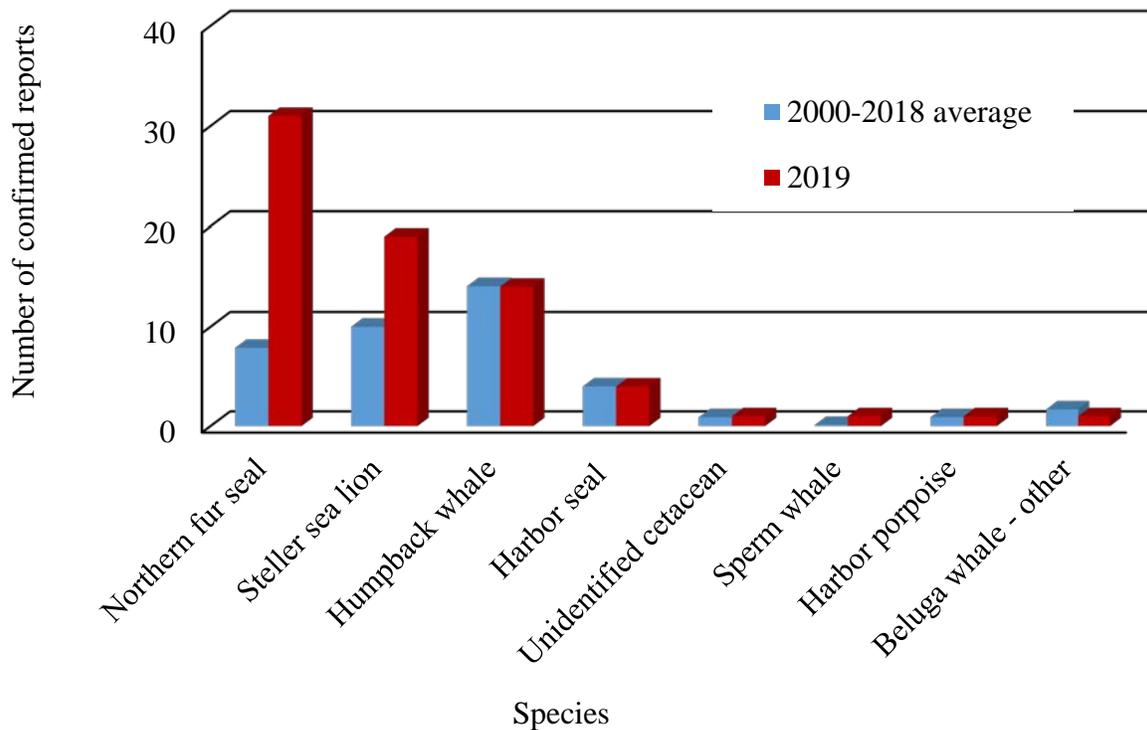


Figure 10. 2019 reports involving confirmed human interaction by species, not including orphaned/abandoned animals collected for rehabilitation.

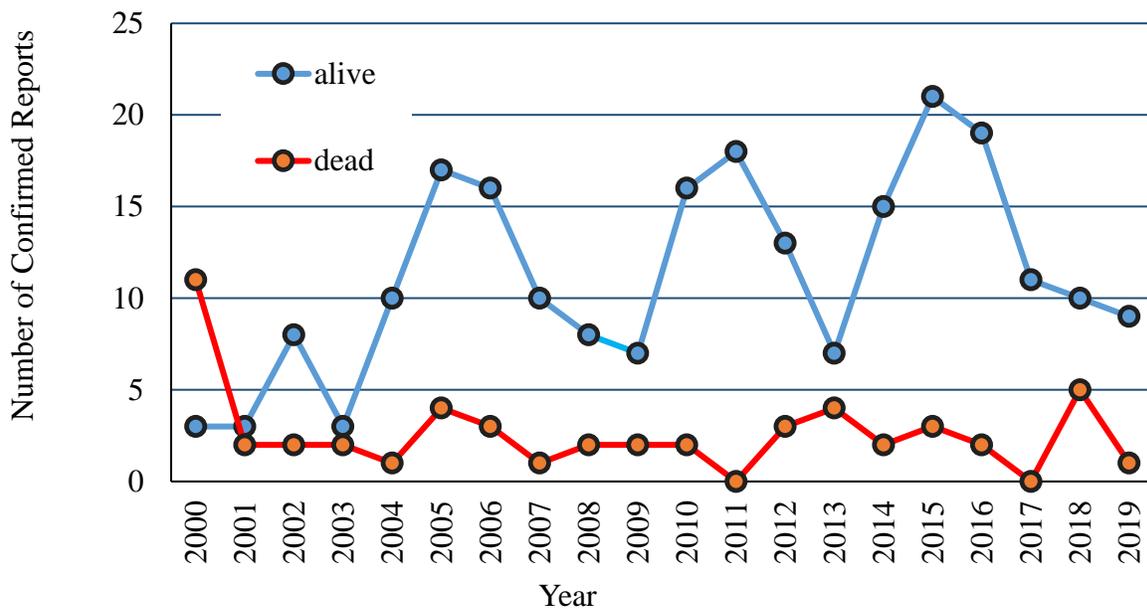


Figure 11. Reports of dead and live cetacean entanglements, 2000 – 2019.

G. Alaska SeaLife Center

The Alaska SeaLife Center is the only facility that is qualified to rehabilitate and release marine mammal species under NMFS jurisdiction in Alaska.

Table 6. 2019 Alaska Region live strandings handled by the Alaska SeaLife Center for rehabilitation by species, outcome, and number of animals.

Species	Outcome	Animals
Harbor seal	Died after admit	1
	Died in transport	1
	Euthanized	2
	Rehab/Released	5
	<i>Harbor seal total</i>	9
Spotted seal	Rehab/Transferred to Mystic Aquarium, Mystic, CT	1
	<i>Spotted seal</i>	1
Bearded seal	Rehab/Transferred to Long Marine Laboratory, Santa Cruz, CA	1
	<i>Bearded Seal</i>	1
Elephant seal	Relocated/Released	1
	<i>Elephant Seal</i>	1
Total		12