

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). It is assumed that most beluga whales from these summering areas overwinter in the Bering Sea, excluding those found in the northern Gulf of Alaska (Shelden 1994). Seasonal distribution is affected by ice cover, tidal conditions, access to prey, temperature, and human interaction (Lowry 1985). During the winter, beluga whales occur in offshore waters associated with pack ice. In the spring, they migrate to warmer coastal estuaries, bays, and rivers for molting (Finley 1982) and calving (Sergeant and Brodie 1969). Annual migrations may cover thousands of kilometers (Reeves 1990).

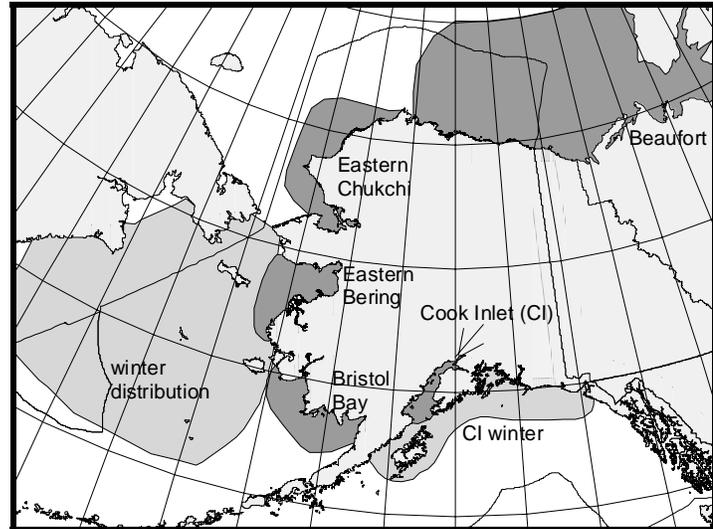


Figure 18. Approximate distribution of beluga whales in Alaska waters. The dark shading displays the summer distributions of the five stocks. Winter distributions are depicted with lighter shading.

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 in summer (Frost and Lowry 1990), distribution unknown outside of summer; 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: preliminary mitochondrial DNA analyses indicate distinct differences among summering areas (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 1997). 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 (Fig. 18).

POPULATION SIZE

Aerial surveys for beluga whales in Cook Inlet were conducted annually in June or July during 1994-97 using an 'approach' survey technique that involves repeated circling of observed groups, and videotape recording. The approach technique differs from 'passing mode' surveys performed for belugas in other stocks, in that during passing surveys the aircraft maintains a straight flight path. The approach technique allows each group of whales observed and recorded on video to be corrected for 1) animals that were under the surface, and 2) animals missed by observers yet recorded on video. The sum of median counts for all groups observed in the 1994-97 surveys is 279, 338, 361, and 264 whales, respectively (Rugh et al. 1997a). The process of using medians instead of maximum counts reduces the effects of outliers (extremes in high or low counts), makes the results more comparable to other surveys which lack multiple passes over whale groups, and is more appropriate than using maximums when the counts will be corrected for missed whales (Rugh et al. 1996).

An abundance estimate based on the 1995-97 count data has not been derived. However, correcting the 1994 count data to account for subsurface animals (using the formula of McLaren 1961; 1.093, CV is unavailable) and animals at the surface that were missed (2.45; CV=0.14) resulted in an abundance estimate of 747 (CV=0.19) beluga

whales in Cook Inlet (Hobbs et al. 1995). Correcting the 1994 abundance estimate to account for the proportion of newborns and yearlings not observed due to their small size and dark coloration (1.18; Brodie 1971), results in a total corrected abundance estimate of 881 whales (747×1.18) for the Cook Inlet stock. When applying this same approach to the count data from 1997 (264), the resulting estimate of abundance is 834 ($264 \times [2.45 \times 1.093 \times 1.118]$). Therefore, because similar techniques were used in 1994 and 1997, at this time the best estimate of abundance for this stock is 834. Pending the development of a CV for this approach or the development of alternative approaches, the CV for this estimate is assumed to equal the CV for the 1994 estimate (0.19).

Minimum Population Estimate

The survey technique utilized for estimating the abundance of beluga whales is a direct count which incorporates correction factors. Although a CV for the newborn and yearling correction factor is not available, the Alaska Scientific Review Group concluded that the abundance estimate and associated CV(N) are adequately conservative to serve as an estimate of minimum population size (N_{MIN}) for this stock (DeMaster 1997). N_{MIN} is calculated according to Equation 1 from the PBR Guidelines (Wade and Angliss 1997): $N_{\text{MIN}} = N / \exp(0.842 \times [\ln(1 + [\text{CV}(N)]^2)]^{1/2})$. Using the population estimate (N) of 834 and its associated CV(N) of 0.19, N_{MIN} for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales is 712.

Current Population Trend

In general, uncorrected counts have ranged from 300 to 500 beluga whales within Cook Inlet between 1970 and 1996. Data from prior National Marine Mammal Laboratory and NMFS Alaska Regional Office studies indicated median counts of 200 beluga whales in June 1991, 255 in June 1992, 344 in June 1993, 287 in July 1993, 157 in September 1993, 279 in June 1994, 338 in July 1995, 361 in June 1996, and 264 in June 1997. Only the 1993-97 surveys provided thorough coverage of Cook Inlet, however, all of the surveys included coverage of the Suisitna River delta where most of the whales occur (Rugh et al. 1997a). The lower count in 1997 (264) may be a cause for concern.

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 re-authorized 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: $\text{PBR} = N_{\text{MIN}} \times 0.5R_{\text{MAX}} \times F_R$. Based on the recommendations of the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council (CIMMC) and the Alaska Scientific Review Group (DeMaster 1997), for the purpose of promoting co-management of this stock an F_R of 1.0 was used. Thus, $\text{PBR} = 14$ animals ($712 \times 0.02 \times 1.0$) for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Three types of commercial fishing gear that could possibly interact with beluga whales occur in Cook Inlet (purse seine, drift gillnet, and set gillnet) and are used to catch each of the five species of Pacific salmon, as well as Pacific herring. There are no observer data as fishery observers have not monitored any of these fisheries within Cook Inlet. An additional source of information on the number of beluga whales killed or injured incidental to commercial fishery operations is the self-reported fisheries information required of vessel operators by the MMPA. During the period between 1990 and 1996, fisher self-reports indicated no mortalities of beluga whales from interactions with commercial fishing operations (Table 14a). Self-reported fisheries data are incomplete for 1994, not available for 1995, and considered unreliable for 1996 (see Appendix 4).

In the past, beluga mortalities have been attributed to Cook Inlet fisheries with the fishing-related mortality during the 3-year period from 1981 to 1983 estimated at 3-6 animals per year (Burns and Seaman 1986). Accordingly, though there were no self-reported fishery mortalities of beluga whales, the Cook Inlet gillnet fisheries (having a

combined total of over 1,325 active permits in 1996) have been included in Table 14a because logbook records (fisher self-reports required during 1990-94) are most likely negatively biased (Credle et al. 1994).

Based on a lack of reported mortalities, the estimated minimum mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is zero belugas per year from this stock. However, a reliable estimate of the mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is currently unavailable because of the absence of observer placements in the Cook Inlet fisheries mentioned above.

Table 14a. Summary of incidental mortality of beluga whales (Cook Inlet stock) due to commercial fisheries from 1990 through 1996 and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate. Mean annual mortality in brackets represents a minimum estimate from self-reported fisheries information. Data from 1992 to 1996 (or the most recent 5 years of available data) are used in the mortality calculation when more than 5 years of data are provided for a particular fishery. n/a indicates that data are not available.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Range of observer coverage	Reported mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Observer program total	92-96					0
Cook Inlet salmon drift gillnet	90-96	self reports	n/a	0, 0, 0, 0, n/a n/a, n/a	n/a	[0]
Cook Inlet salmon set gillnet	90-96	self reports	n/a	0, 0, 0, 0, n/a n/a, n/a	n/a	[0]
Minimum total annual mortality						0

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

A study conducted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), in cooperation with the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC) and the Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals, estimated the subsistence take in 1993 at 17 whales based on surveys of 16 of 19 households known to have hunted in 1993 (Table 14b: Stanek 1994). This was considered a minimum estimate, and was increased by adding the estimated number of whales taken from households not surveyed (3) and by hunters from areas outside of Cook Inlet (10) resulting in an estimated total take of 30 (17 + 3 + 10) whales. However, in consultation with native elders from the Cook Inlet region, the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council (CIMMC) estimated the annual number of belugas taken by subsistence hunters to be greater than 30 animals (DeMaster 1995: p. 5).

There was no systematic Cook Inlet beluga harvest survey in 1994. Instead, Cook Inlet harvest data for 1994 were compiled at the November 1994 ABWC meeting. Representatives of the CIMMC, ADF&G Division of Subsistence, and an active Cook Inlet hunter each presented harvest information they knew about. They discussed the information among themselves to eliminate redundancy, and agreed upon a final 1994 harvest estimate of 19 retrieved and 2 struck and lost. This included 2 belugas taken in Cook Inlet by hunters from Kotzebue Sound. The ADF&G representative estimated that there were 35-50 active beluga hunting households in the Cook Inlet region.

The most recent subsistence harvest data concerning the Cook Inlet beluga whale stock is provided in Table 14b. The most thorough subsistence harvest surveys ever completed in Cook Inlet were conducted by the CIMMC during 1995 and 1996. The CIMMC (through the ABWC) reported 72 whales taken from the stock in 1995, including 22 (30.5%) animals which were struck and lost. During 1996, 98 to 147 whales were estimated to have been taken from the stock, including a range of struck and lost estimates from 49 to 98 whales. However, some of the local hunters believe this estimate of struck and lost is positively biased. The 1995 and 1996 CIMMC take estimates are considered reliable. Given these data and using an estimate of 123 animals for 1996, the annual subsistence take averaged approximately 72 during the 3-year period from 1994 to 1996. Due to the thoroughness of the 1995 and 1996 harvest reports as compared to earlier years, it is not possible to ascertain the trend in subsistence take. However, due to the pattern of increasing harvest levels in this area, subsistence mortality for the Cook Inlet stock has been averaged over a 3-year period whereas a 5-year period is used for the other four beluga whale stocks occurring in this document.

Table 14b. Summary of the subsistence harvest data for the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales, 1992-96. n/a indicates the data are not available.

Year	Reported total number taken	Estimated range of total take	Reported number harvested	Estimated number struck and lost
1992	9 ¹	n/a	9	n/a
1993	30 ²	n/a	n/a	n/a
1994	21 ²	n/a	19 ²	2 ²
1995	72	n/a	50	22
1996	123	98-147	49	49-98
Mean annual take (1994-96)	72			

¹ Does not include the number of struck and lost; reported take an estimate; ² Estimated value (see text).

OTHER MORTALITY

Mortalities related to stranding events have been reported in Cook Inlet. For example, in June of 1996, 63 animals stranded in the Susitna Delta (Rugh et al. 1997b). Four of these animals are known to have died as a result of the stranding event (B. Smith, pers. comm., NMFS, 222 W 7th Ave., Anchorage, AK, 99513). Such mortalities are not likely to be associated with human-related activities.

STATUS OF STOCK

Beluga whales are not listed as “depleted” under the MMPA or listed as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act. A reliable estimate of the annual rate of mortality incidental to commercial fisheries is unavailable. Therefore, it is unknown whether the kill rate is insignificant. At present, annual commercial fishery-related mortality levels less than 1.4 per year (i.e., 10% of PBR) can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. Based on currently available data, the estimated annual level of total human-caused mortality is 72 beluga whales (estimated exclusively from subsistence harvest data) exceeds the PBR (14) for this stock. Therefore, the Cook Inlet beluga whale stock is classified as a strategic stock. It is not possible to ascertain trends in abundance at this time; however, the current level of human-caused removals is not sustainable.

Sustainable harvest levels for this stock will be determined from the analysis of information gathered through the cooperative management process, and will reflect the degree of uncertainty associated with the information obtained for this stock. Efforts were initiated in 1995 and continued in 1996 to develop an umbrella agreement among the Indigenous People’s Council for Marine Mammals, FWS, and NMFS regarding the cooperative management of certain stocks of marine mammals utilized by Native subsistence hunters in Alaska. The final agreement was signed August 27, 1997. It is anticipated that in 1998, efforts will be initiated to formalize a specific agreement with local Alaska Native Organizations and NMFS regarding the management of this stock.

Habitat Concerns

The State of Alaska has held 41 oil and gas lease sales in Cook Inlet since 1959. The planned Cook Inlet Area-wide Sale is scheduled for Feb. 1999, and will offer 4.2 million acres in and around Cook Inlet including tracts at the major river mouths, such as the Beluga River, Susitna River, and Little Susitna River, which are areas of concentrated use by belugas in ice-free seasons. Activities associated with these sales include seismic geophysical exploration, drilling, discharge of drill muds and cuttings, discharge of sanitary wastes and production/formation waters, construction of drill platforms, vessel and aircraft support. It is unknown what affect, if any, the lease sales and associated activities will have on the Cook Inlet beluga whale stock.

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