

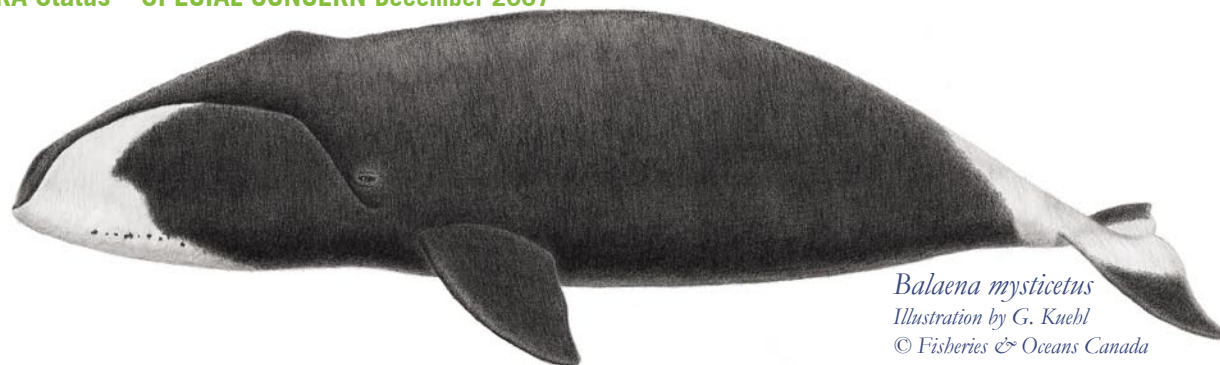
Aquatic Species at Risk



The Bowhead Whale (Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Sea Population) a *Species at Risk* in the North

COSEWIC Status – SPECIAL CONCERN April 2009

SARA Status – SPECIAL CONCERN December 2007



Balaena mysticetus
Illustration by G. Kuehl
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This population of Bowhead Whale was reconfirmed in 2009 as a species of Special Concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). It is listed under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) and was afforded

protection under SARA as of December 2007. Additional protection is afforded through the federal *Fisheries Act*. Under SARA, a management plan must be developed for this species.

General Description

The Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*) is a large baleen whale in the Balaenidae family. Other common names include the Greenland Whale, Greenland Right Whale and Polar Whale. In northern Aboriginal languages, it is known as *Arviq* or *Arvik* (Inuktitut and Inuvialuktun), *Agkbovik* (Inupiat), *Akhgvopik* (Yupik) and *Ittiv* (Chukchi). The Bowhead Whale has the following characteristics:

- Barrel-shaped body and a very large head (about 30% of total body length);
- Upper jaw is bowed sharply upward; each side of upper jaw has on average 330 baleen plates up to 427 cm long;
- The blubber layer is thick, from 5.5 cm on the chin to about 28 cm over the trunk reaching a maximum of 50 cm;
- Flippers are small and paddle-shaped;
- No dorsal fin or dorsal hump;
- Flukes are pointed at the tip;
- Calves are 4 to 4.5 m long at birth and brownish black in colour; and
- Adults are black in colour with white areas near the chin, eyelids, flipper insertions, ano-genital area, tail stock and flukes.



Distribution

Bowhead Whales have a nearly circumpolar distribution in the northern hemisphere, with a territory that covers water between 54° and 85°N latitude. Physical barriers such as land and impassable ice are believed to have divided the world's bowheads into four populations, two of which occur in Canada. The extent of occurrence of the Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Sea population in Canadian waters is roughly 207,000 km². Whales in this population winter in the western and central Bering Sea where there is adequate open water and broken pack ice. In the spring, this population of Bowhead Whales migrate north and east to the eastern Beaufort Sea. In summer, they are distributed mainly in the Canadian Beaufort Sea, along the south and west coasts of Banks Island, in Amundsen Gulf, and along western Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula. In fall, the Bowhead Whales migrate from the Canadian Beaufort Sea into the Alaskan Beaufort and Chukchi Sea, and then into the Bering Sea.

Habitat and Life History

Bowhead Whales occur in marine waters within areas ranging from open water to thick, unconsolidated pack ice. They break through ice over 20 cm thick with the crown of the head to breathe, and can navigate and communicate under extensive ice fields using their sophisticated acoustic sense. They grow and develop slowly, reaching sexual maturity at about 25 years of age. Females grow faster than males, and give birth approximately once every three years during the spring migration. Gestation lasts between

12 and 16 months. Lifespan is estimated between 50 and 75 years, with some individuals reaching over 100 years of age.

Diet

Bowhead Whales feed on crustacean zooplankton such as euphausiids and copepods. Epibenthic organisms (mysids and gammariid amphipods) are also consumed. It has been suggested that the annual variability in Bowhead Whale sightings is related to the abundance and distribution of zooplankton.

Threats

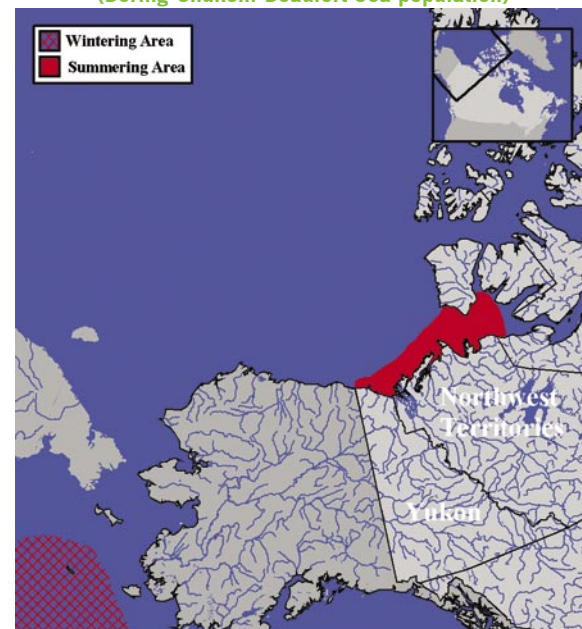
Commercial whaling was once the greatest threat to the Bowhead Whale and the main reason why the species is at risk in parts of its range. At present, the Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*) may pose the greatest threat. Bowhead Whales are known to be displaced for short periods of time by industrial activity such as oil and gas exploration and development. Potential long-term effects on Bowhead Whales are unknown. Lastly, climatic factors, which influence ice conditions and prey availability, may impact the survival and/or distribution of this whale.

Similar Species

There are no similar species.

Text Sources: COSEWIC Status Report 2009.

BOWHEAD WHALE DISTRIBUTION (Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Sea population)



For more information, visit the SARA Registry website at www.SARAreistry.gc.ca and the Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) website noted below.

Cette publication est également disponible en français.

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www.aquaticspeciesatrisk.gc.ca

Section 32 (1) of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) states that “no person shall kill, harm, harass, capture or take an individual of a wildlife species that is listed as an extirpated species, an endangered species or a threatened species.”