

## Aquatic Species at Risk



# The Beluga Whale (Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay) a *Species at Risk* in the North

COSEWIC Status – SPECIAL CONCERN May 2004

SARA Status – UNDER CONSIDERATION



*Delphinapterus leucas*  
Illustration by G. Kuehl

### General Description

The Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) is a toothed whale and belongs to the family Monodontidae. It derives its name from the Russian *belukha*, which means white. This whale is also known as white whale in English, *qilalugaq* in the Inuktitut, Inuvialuktan and Inuinactun dialects, and *sigsuaq* in the Inupiat dialect. Belugas have the following characteristics and distinguishing features:

- Adults range in total length from 2.6 to 4.5 m and weigh up to 1,900 kg
- Adult females are about 80% the length of males; newborn calves are about 48% the length of their mothers
- Adults are pure white in colour; newborns are born a dark grey, sometimes with mottling, and lighten as they mature
- Belugas lack a dorsal fin, possibly an adaptation to ice-filled waters of the Arctic

This population of beluga has been identified as Special Concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). It is currently being considered for listing under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA).

Protection is afforded through the federal *Fisheries Act*. If listed under the SARA, it will be afforded additional protection. Under the SARA, a management plan must be developed for this population.



## Distribution

The Beluga Whale has a circumpolar distribution, found in the Arctic as far as 82°N latitude, in the Pacific sub-Arctic south to 60°N (Alaska), and in the St. Lawrence Estuary as far south as 47°N. A total of 22 possible populations have recently been designated, seven of which are present in Canadian waters during at least part of the year. The Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay population spends the summer in the islands of the Canadian Archipelago centered around the waters of Prince Regent Inlet, Peel Sound and Barrow Strait. In the late summer and early fall, these whales migrate through Lancaster Sound to the waters north of Baffin Bay in the area of the North Water polynya. Some whales continue eastward and southward along the West Greenland coast to winter.

## Habitat and Life History

The Beluga Whale uses different habitats depending on the season and progression of ice breakup and freeze. Typically, in the late spring, they congregate along ice edges, penetrate leads, and may appear in river estuaries. During the summer, they are found along the coastline and in shallow waters. They also frequent specific river estuaries, which may serve as moulting sites or as shelter from predators. In late summer or early fall, they leave the estuarine areas for deeper waters, possibly to feed intensively. From there, they migrate to offshore winter areas, sometimes over long distances. In late winter to early spring, mating occurs. Very little is known about the breeding behaviour of Beluga Whales. Females become sexually

mature between four and seven years of age, males between six and seven years. Gestation takes about 13 to 14.5 months. The lactation period is estimated to be 20 to 32 months. For this population of beluga, the average lifespan is 10 to 15 years, with some individuals reaching 40 to 50 years.

## Diet

Beluga Whales feed on small fish and crustaceans. In High Arctic waters, they feed on Turbot (*Reinhardtius Hippoglossoides*) and Arctic Cod (*Boreogadus saida*). They also eat Arctic Charr (*Salvelinus alpinus*), squid, shrimp, molluscs and marine worms.

## Threats

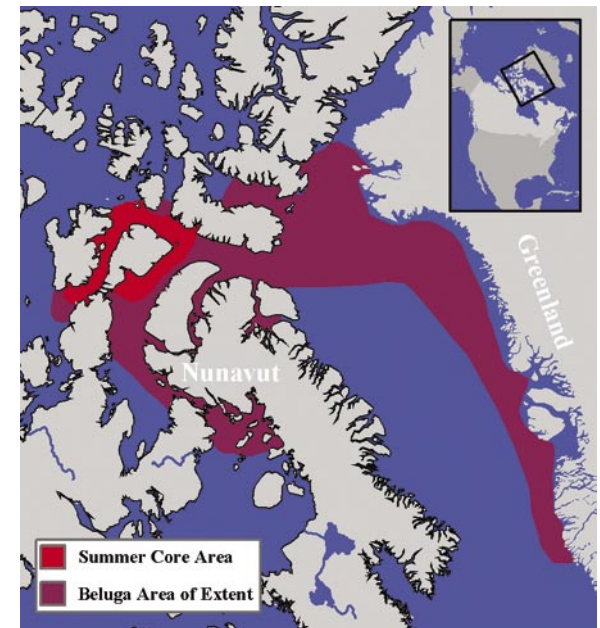
Beluga Whales are vulnerable to predation by Polar Bears (*Ursus maritimus*) and Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*). Their propensity to return to the same estuaries year after year makes them vulnerable to human hunting and disturbance. For the Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay population, exploitation by Greenland Inuit has had an adverse effect on whales that overwinter along the West Greenland coast. This is not a concern for Beluga that winter in the North Water polynya area.

## Similar Species

There are no similar species.

Text Sources: Richard 2001; COSEWIC Status Report 2004.

### BELUGA WHALE DISTRIBUTION Eastern High Arctic Population



For more information, visit the SARA Registry Website at [www.SARAreistry.gc.ca](http://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](http://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.”