

Aquatic Species at Risk



The Beluga Whale (Western Hudson Bay Population) 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

Beluga Whales have a circumpolar distribution, and are 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 latitude. A total of 22 possible populations have recently been recognized, seven of which are present in Canadian waters during at least part of the year. The Western Hudson Bay population aggregates in the Churchill, Nelson and Seal river estuaries on the southwest coast of Hudson Bay starting around mid-June. They begin a migration to Hudson Strait in late summer or early fall, which they reach in late fall and winter. Most return to western Hudson Bay in spring or early summer when ice conditions allow. It appears that some enter Frobisher Bay during the summer instead of migrating back into Hudson Bay.

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 feeding or moulting sites and 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 the Beluga Whale. 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 15 years, with some individuals reaching 40 to 50 years.

Diet

Beluga Whales feed on crustaceans and small fish. In Hudson Bay, they eat shrimp, Capelin (*Mallotus villosus*), Sand Lance (*Ammodytes americanus*). Belugas also eat Arctic Charr (*Salvelinus alpinus*), Arctic Cod (*Boreogadus saida*), Turbot (*Reinhardtius hippogiossoides*), salmon, squid, molluscs and marine worms.

Threats

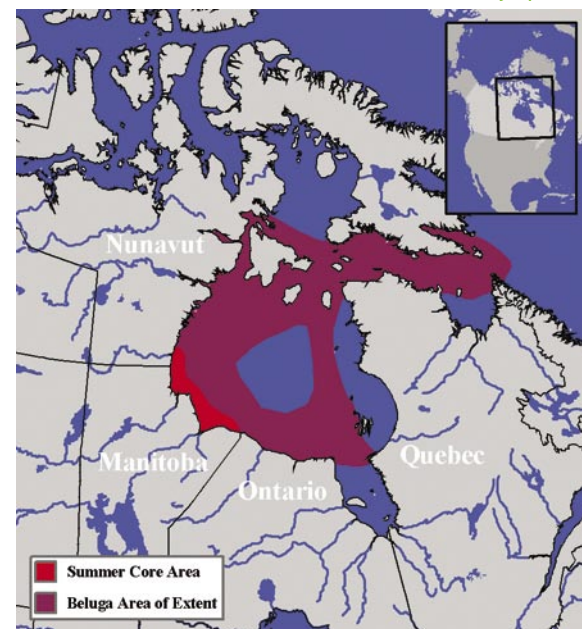
Beluga Whales are vulnerable to predation by Polar Bears (*Ursus maritimus*) and Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*). Their propensity to return to the same estuaries year after year makes them vulnerable to human hunting, although hunting in Manitoba estuaries is minimal.

Similar Species

There are no similar species.

Text Sources: Richard 2001; COSEWIC Status Report 2004.

BULUGA WHALE DISTRIBUTION Western Hudson Bay Population



For more information, visit the SARA Registry Website at www.SARAregistry.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.”