



Protecting the Beluga Whale

BELUGA WHALE

Scientific name:

Delphinapterus leucas

Weight:

700-1600 kg

Length:

2.6-4.5 m

Adult Beluga
(*Delphinapterus leucas*);
Arctic Ocean, Arctic



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The beluga whale is a migratory species that live primarily in areas with Arctic sea ice, with about two-thirds of the world population summering in Canadian waters. A few small populations are found further south, including the endangered St. Lawrence River belugas. In spite of over 30 years of protection efforts, there is little or no indication that the St. Lawrence population is recovering.

Beluga whales are close to the top of the marine food chain and are powerful indicators of the overall health of the marine environment. They're also known as "sea canaries" for their extraordinary range of vocalizations, ranging from high-pitched whistles to low, repeated grunts.

Beluga whales are also culturally important to many Inuit communities in the Arctic; the skin and outer blubber layers, called maktaaq, are used as a source of nutrition and for cultural traditions.

GLOBAL STATUS

Over 200,000

IUCN Redlist:

Near Threatened

CITES:

Appendix II

BELUGA POPULATIONS AND STATUS IN CANADA

A total of 19 possible populations have recently been delineated, 8 of which are present in Canadian waters during at least part of the year.

Cumberland Sound

1,500

COSEWIC:

Threatened

Eastern Beaufort Sea

39,258

COSEWIC:

Not At Risk

Eastern High Arctic

/ Baffin Bay

21,200

COSEWIC:

Special Concern

Eastern Hudson Bay

3,351

COSEWIC:

Endangered

St. Lawrence Estuary

~ 889

COSEWIC:

Endangered

Ungava Bay

32

COSEWIC:

Endangered

Western Hudson Bay

57,300

COSEWIC:

Special Concern

THREATS

Climate change

Thousands of years of evolution have prepared Arctic species like the polar bear, walrus and beluga for life on and around the sea ice. Because of climate change, that ice cover has been changing rapidly, in both extent and thickness, and shrinking far too quickly for these species to adapt. A beluga's life is closely tied to sea ice, both as a place to feed and a place to take refuge. Slow swimming beluga whales rely on sea ice as a place to hide from predators like orcas.



Habitat destruction and degradation

The melting ice is opening Arctic waters to more human activities like commercial fishing, oil and gas exploration, mining operations and shipping.

Noise pollution

Seismic explorations and intense commercial shipping cause noise pollution that likely has a major impact on belugas' ability to communicate, detect predators, find food, and care for their young.

Other threats, particularly to the St. Lawrence beluga population, include contamination by toxic chemicals, and a reduction in the abundance, quality, and availability of prey.

WHAT IS WWF DOING?

WWF is working to help identify critical beluga areas in the Arctic and St. Lawrence Estuary and secure adequate protection for them. We also have completed an oil spill trajectory modeling project that maps out multiple oil spills in the Arctic's Beaufort Sea and how these spills could interact with wildlife, including belugas.

WWF has also supported Arctic beluga satellite tagging research, as well as community-based projects monitoring beluga health, and is leading research to better understand the impacts of ocean noise. We have also supported the work on St. Lawrence Estuary belugas through our Endangered Species Recovery Fund, and founded as well as co-chaired the recovery team for the St. Lawrence population.



Why we are here.

We are creating solutions to the most serious conservation challenges facing our planet, helping people and nature thrive.

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Bielo

The word beluga comes from the Russian word "bielo" meaning white; however, these whales are born dark gray. It can take eight years to turn white.

1-100's

Beluga pods range from a few to hundreds of animals, and normally segregate into males, and females with dependent young

Sea Canaries

Known as "sea canaries," belugas are one of the most vocal of all whales.

Did you know?

Belugas return annually to specific estuaries and shallow areas to shed their skin, rubbing off old skin on fine grain sand and gravel.



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Information

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