



Bowhead Whale



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Bowhead Whale Basics

Latin name: *Balaena mysticetus*

Inuktitut name: Arviq or Agviq

Common name(s):

Bowhead whale, Bowhead, Greenland right whale

Global status: Least Concern (IUCN Red List)

Canadian status: Special Concern (COSEWIC)

Svalbard-Barents Sea status:

Critically Endangered (IUCN Red List)

Okhotsk Sea status:

Endangered (IUCN Red List)

Population: Estimated 24,000

Weight: Up to 100,000 kg (100 tonnes)

Length: Up to 20 metres

The huge, slow-moving bowhead is an Arctic whale found primarily near and often amongst sea ice. The bowhead whale famously has the longest lifespan of any wild mammal species – incredibly, some have been known to live over 200 years. The bowhead whale stays in the Arctic year-round, moving between summer feeding and wintering areas in pursuit of large concentrations of zooplankton (copepods) and to avoid predation by killer whales.

A History of Overhunting

Experts estimate that there may once have been as many as 50,000 bowhead whales in Arctic waters. However, after 300 years of severe over-hunting for their highly prized oil and baleen, the bowhead whale came perilously close to extinction in some regions.

Since the banning of commercial whaling, populations have recovered substantially. Today the global total is estimated at 24,000, and although the historic range off Labrador and into the Gulf of the St. Lawrence remains unoccupied by bowhead whales, the Eastern Canada-West Greenland and Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Sea populations appear to be steadily increasing.

Though commercial whaling has been banned, native Alaskans and Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit are allowed a limited subsistence hunt.

Key Threats

Bowhead whales face a host of new threats in the Arctic, where climate change is resulting in less sea ice and longer periods of open water in the summer, leaving bowhead whales exposed to new and increased pressures.

- Predatory killer whales are moving into bowhead whale range in greater numbers.
- Bowhead whales are sensitive to acoustic disturbance and are being subjected to increased ocean noise by industrial development.
- More commercial shipping, military activity, and offshore seismic surveys increase the threat of strikes from ships and oil spills.
- Increased commercial fishing presents risks of entanglement in fishing gear.
- An oil spill would be devastating for bowhead whales, whose 200 to 400 baleen plates would quickly become fouled by contaminated water. The situation would be worsened by the slow response time to an Arctic oil spill.

How WWF Helps

- For over 40 years WWF has supported research into bowhead whale ecology, diet, movements, habitat characteristics, and population surveys.
- WWF and partners are now testing drones to allow identify bowhead whales from aerial photographs, as a non-invasive way to measure population trends and movements.
- WWF worked with the community of Clyde River to help document a critical feeding area for bowhead whales. In 2009, the world's first bowhead whale sanctuary was created, called Ninginganiq (Isabella Bay).



Information:
media@wwfcanada.org

Reproduction

Bowhead whales probably don't breed until they are 15.

Global Warming

Associated with rapid global warming, recently a few bowhead whales appear to have moved right through the NW Passage - from Alaska to Greenland - probably for the first time in over 20,000 years.

Commercial Value

The baleen plates were highly valued in the 18th and 19th Centuries as fashionable ladies' corset stays. The rich whale oil derived from the blubber of bowhead whales and other great whale species was the main source of fuel for lamps and oil stoves prior to the development of crude oil deposits starting in the early 20th century.



Bowhead whales heads are massive (up to 40% of the total length), with a prominent triangular bump ('rostrum') in front of the blow hole, which helps when they need to break through thick ice.

Did You Know? Bowhead whales can push through ice at least 60 cm thick.

Bowhead Whale Range

This map summarizes information on the distribution and movement patterns of the bowhead whale. Current distribution areas of seasonal aggregation are identified, with particular focus on high-density occurrences during the summer.

