

NOAA releases recovery plan for endangered beluga whales

Focus on research and potential threats

By DAN JOLING
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — A federal plan for the recovery of an endangered Alaska beluga whale calls for a reduction in threats of high concern while scientists try to pinpoint what has kept the population from growing.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has announced its recovery plan for Cook Inlet beluga whales, a population listed as endangered since 2008.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service acknowledges it does not know why the population hasn't bounced back. In the absence of an answer, the agency will focus on research and potential threats, such as noise and the cumulative effects of "multiple stressors."

"Until we know which threats are limiting this species' recovery, the strategy of this recovery plan is to focus recovery efforts on threats identified as of medium or high relative concern," the agency said.

Alaska fought the endangered species listing of Cook Inlet belugas eight years ago and took issue with the recovery plan. State Division of Wildlife Conservation director Bruce Dale in a statement said it contains untenable recovery criteria that will limit acceptance by interested parties and extend hurdles to development.

"The most critical action for recovering the Cook Inlet belugas will be to determine why the population isn't growing," Dale said. "The threats limiting recovery are unknown."



AP Photo/AI Grillo

One of two beluga whales that washed ashore on a beach south of Anchorage, Alaska, in 2003. The Cook Inlet beluga whale population was listed as endangered in 2008, and a federal recovery plan released Wednesday calls for a reduction in threats of highest concern, including noise and cumulative factors that may be keeping the population from growing.

A 1979 survey counted nearly 1,300 beluga whales. A 2014 survey estimated just 340 and a population continuing to trend downward.

The recovery plan calls for an upgrade to "threatened" status when the population reaches 520 animals and delisting when there are 780. Dale took issue with those targets.

"These demographic criteria are problematic because the number of animals in a

population is not necessarily an indication of the risk of extinction," Dale said. The plan includes threats-based recovery criteria that cannot be measured and are impossible to meet, he said.

Cook Inlet belugas are one of five beluga populations in U.S. waters. Cook Inlet stretches 180 miles from Anchorage to the Gulf of Alaska and the fisheries service considers 1,300 animals to be its carrying capacity.

The whales turn white as adults and can reach 15 feet long. They feed on salmon, smaller fish, crab, shrimp, squid and clams and in late summer can be spotted from highways leading from Anchorage, chasing salmon schooled at stream mouths.

The Cook Inlet beluga population dwindled steadily through the 1980s and early '90s. The decline accelerated between 1994 and 1998 when Alaska Natives harvested nearly half the remaining 650 whales in only four years. Subsistence hunting ended in 1999.

Federal officials initially figured that controlling subsistence hunting would allow the population to recover. When it did not, they declared belugas endangered in 2008.

The agency identified 10 potential threats to belugas. Of highest concern are catastrophic events, such as natural disasters or oil spills; cumulative effects of multiple stressors; and noise.

Threats of medium concern include disease agents, such as blooms of harmful algae, loss of habitat, a reduction in prey and unauthorized killing.

Threats of relatively low concern include pollution, predation and subsistence hunting.

The agency estimated recovery could take at least 50 years, which translates into two generations of whales.

Karla Dutton, Alaska program director for Defenders of Wildlife, said the recovery plan was overdue but welcome.

"We call on National Marine Fisheries Service to properly fund in a timely manner the science needed to further understand and address these threats so we can work together to recover this iconic Cook Inlet species," she said by email.



AP Photo/Bizuayehu Tesfaye

SeaWorld Adventure Park trainer Ken Peters, left, looks to a killer whale during a 2006 performance at Shamu Stadium inside the theme park in San Diego. SeaWorld San Diego is ending its controversial and long-running killer whale show.

SeaWorld San Diego ending killer whale show

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — SeaWorld San Diego is ending its long-running killer whale show after years of outcry and falling attendance prompted it to renounce theatrical orca displays.

The show that featured killer whales cavorting with trainers and leaping high out of the Shamu Stadium pool had its final performances on Sunday.

This summer, the park will unveil a new attraction in the revamped pool. Orca Encounter is being billed as an educational experience that will show how killer whales eat, communicate and navigate.

The animals will still receive cues from trainers, however.

"You will still see a whale leaping out of the water," Al Garver, a former orca trainer and vice president of zoological operations, told the San Diego Union-Tribune. "We want to be able to demonstrate behaviors people would see in the wild with the killer whales and their abilities as a top predator in the sea. The vast majority of behaviors people have seen in our shows will be very suitable for demonstrating that."

The park has 11 orcas, ranging in age from 2 to 52 years old.

Under pressure from activists and faced with declining

ticket sales, SeaWorld Entertainment Inc. announced last year it was ending its theatrical orca shows and breeding program.

Parks in Orlando and San Antonio will end their shows by 2019.

SeaWorld has seen attendance fall since the 2013 documentary "Blackfish" criticized conditions of captive orcas, implying that confinement made them more aggressive.

"Blackfish" chronicled the life of Tilikum, an orca that killed a SeaWorld trainer during a performance in Orlando in 2010.

The movie's director has told CBS that the new show was designed to make the audience feel better, not the animals.

"The trainers aren't safe, and the whales aren't happy," Gabriela Cowperthwaite said. "They're still just doing manic circles around concrete swimming pools."

SeaWorld reported Friday that Tilikum, who was believed to be about 36 years old and in poor health, had died in Orlando.

SeaWorld Entertainment Inc. announced last month that it was eliminating 320 jobs across its 12-park company. The company also announced that it would help develop its first SeaWorld park without orcas, in Abu Dhabi.

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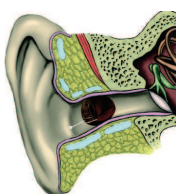
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