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Regulations
Quotas, Landings
Outreach
Resources
Section 7 Consultation

Successful conservation efforts pay off for humpback whales

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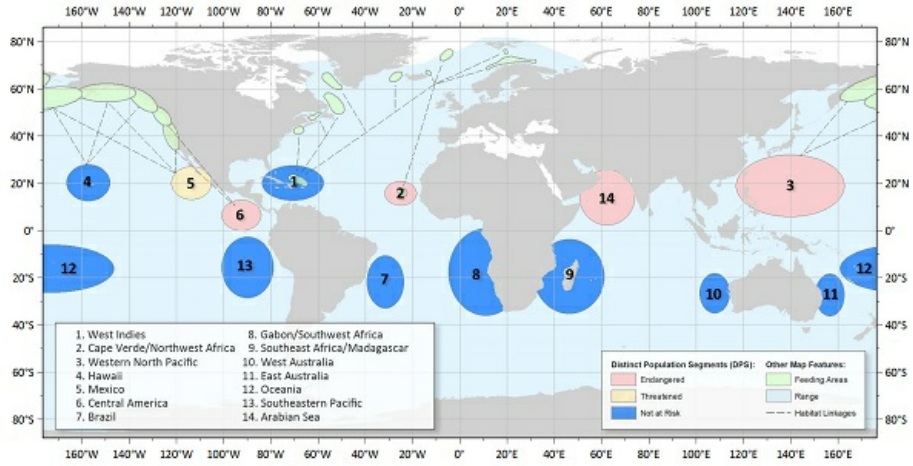
Division into distinct populations paves the way for tailored conservation efforts

Endangered humpback whales in nine of 14 newly identified distinct population segments have recovered enough that they don't warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act, NOAA Fisheries said today. International conservation efforts to protect and conserve whales over the past 40 years proved successful for most populations. Four of the distinct population segments are still protected as endangered, and one is now listed as threatened.

Commercial whaling severely reduced humpback whale numbers from historical levels, and the United States listed all humpback whales as endangered in 1970. NOAA Fisheries worked nationally and internationally to identify and apply protections for humpback whales. The International Whaling Commission's whaling moratorium, imposed in 1982, played a major role in the comeback of humpback whales, and remains in effect.

"Today's news is a true ecological success story," said Eileen Sobeck, assistant NOAA administrator for fisheries. "Whales, including the humpback, serve an important role in our marine environment. Separately managing humpback whale populations that are largely independent of each other allows us to tailor conservation approaches for each population."



Two of the four populations that remain endangered are found in U.S. waters at certain times of the year. The Central America population feeds off the West Coast, while the Western North Pacific population does so in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands. The Mexico population – listed as threatened – also feeds off the West Coast of the United States and Alaska.

Two separate, complementary regulations filed today maintain protections for whales in waters off Hawaii and Alaska by specifying distance limits for approaching vessels. All humpback whales remain protected in U.S. waters and on the high seas under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, regardless of their ESA status.

Get more information on **humpback whales** and the **rules filed today**.

B-roll from: **https://vimeo.com/111689294**

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Humpback Whale (Megaptera novaeangliae)

Status

ESA Threatened- 1 "distinct population segment" (DPS)
» Mexico DPS

ESA Endangered- 4 "distinct population segments" (DPSs)
» Arabian Sea DPS
» Cape Verde Islands/Northwest Africa DPS
» Central America DPS
» Western North Pacific DPS

Species Description

Weight: 25-40 tons (50,000-80,000 pounds; 22,000-36,000 kg); newborns weigh about 1 ton (2,000 pounds; 900 kg)
Length: up to 60 feet (18 m), with females larger than males; newborns are about 15 feet (4.5 m) long
Appearance: primarily dark grey, with some areas of white
Lifespan: about 50 years
Diet: tiny crustaceans (mostly krill), plankton, and small fish; they can consume up to 3,000 pounds (1360 kg) of food per day
Behavior: breaching (jumping out of the water), or slapping the surface

Humpback whales are well known for their long "pectoral" fins, which can be up to 15 feet (4.6 m) in length. Their scientific name, Megaptera novaeangliae, means "big-winged New Englander" as the New England population was the one best known to Europeans. These long fins give them increased maneuverability; they can be used to slow down or even go backwards.

Similar to all baleen whales, adult females are larger than adult males, reaching lengths of up to 60 feet (18 m). Their body coloration is primarily dark grey, but individuals have a variable amount of white on their pectoral fins and belly. This variation is so distinctive that the pigmentation pattern on the undersides of their "flukes" is used to identify individual whales, similar to a human fingerprint.

Humpback whales are the favorite of whale watchers, as they frequently perform aerial displays, such as breaching (jumping out of the water), or slapping the surface with their pectoral fins, tails, or heads.

In the summer, humpbacks are found in high latitude feeding grounds, such as the Gulf of Maine in the Atlantic and Gulf of Alaska in the Pacific. In the winter, they migrate to calving grounds in subtropical or tropical waters, such as the Dominican Republic in the Atlantic and the Hawaiian Islands in the Pacific. The Arabian Sea humpback does not migrate, remaining in tropical waters all year.

Humpback whales travel great distances during their seasonal migration, the farthest migration of any mammal. The longest recorded migration was 11,706 miles (18,840 km), with a trek from American Samoa to the Antarctic Peninsula. One of the more closely studied routes is between Alaska and Hawaii, where humpbacks have been observed making the 3,000-mile (4,830 km) trip in as few as 36 days.

During the summer months, humpbacks spend the majority of their time feeding and building up fat stores (blubber) that they will live off of during the winter. Humpbacks filter feed on tiny crustaceans (mostly krill), plankton, and small fish and can consume up to 3,000 pounds (1,360 kg) of food per day. Several hunting methods involve using air bubbles to herd, corral, or disorient fish. One highly complex variant, called "bubble netting," This link is an external site. is unique to humpbacks. This technique is often performed in groups with defined roles for distracting, scaring, and herding before whale’s lunge at prey corralled near the surface.

In their wintering grounds, humpback whales congregate and engage in mating activities. Humpbacks are generally "polygynous" with males exhibiting competitive behavior on wintering grounds. Aggressive and antagonistic behaviors include chasing, vocal and bubble displays, horizontal tail thrashing, and rear body thrashing. Males within these groups also make physical contact, striking or surfacing on top of one another. These bouts can cause injuries ranging from bloody scrapes to, in one recorded instance, death. Also on wintering grounds, males sing complex songs that can last up to 20 minutes and be heard 20 miles (30 km) away. A male may sing for hours, repeating the song several times. All males in a population sing the same song, but that song continually evolves over time. Humpback whale singing has been studied for decades, but scientists still understand very little about its function.

Gestation lasts for about 11 months. Newborns are 13-16 feet (4-5 m) long and grow quickly from the highly nutritious milk of their mothers. Weaning occurs between 6-10 months after birth. Mothers are protective and affectionate towards their calves, swimming close and frequently touching them with their flippers. Males do not provide parental support for calves. Breeding usually occurs once every two years, but sometimes occurs twice in a three-year span.

Habitat

During migration, humpbacks stay near the surface of the ocean.

While feeding and calving, humpbacks prefer shallow waters. During calving, humpbacks are usually found in the warmest waters available at that latitude. Calving grounds are commonly near offshore reef systems, islands, or continental shores.

Humpback feeding grounds are in cold, productive coastal waters.

Distribution

Humpback whales live in all major oceans from the equator to sub-polar latitudes.

In the western North Atlantic Ocean, humpback whales feed during spring, summer, and fall over a range that encompasses the eastern coast of the United States (including the Gulf of Maine), the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Newfoundland/ Labrador, and western Greenland. In winter, whales from the Gulf of Maine mate and calve primarily in the West Indies. Not all whales migrate to the West Indies every winter, and significant numbers of animals are found in mid- and high-latitude regions at this time.

In the North Pacific, there are at least three separate populations:

1. California/Oregon/Washington stock that winters in coastal Central America and Mexico and migrates to areas ranging from the coast of California to southern British Columbia in summer/fall;
2. Central North Pacific stock that winters in the Hawaiian Islands and migrates to northern British Columbia/ Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound west to Kodiak; and

3. Western North Pacific stock that winters near Japan and probably migrates to waters west of the Kodiak Archipelago (the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands) in summer/fall. There is some mixing between these populations, though they are still considered distinct stocks.

In the Southern Hemisphere, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) This link is an external site. has designated seven major breeding stocks linked to seven major feeding areas. Most breeding areas for Southern Hemisphere humpbacks are at 20°S, although some are in the Northern Hemisphere, including areas along the west coast of Africa and Central America. In Costa Rica, there is overlap with Northern Hemisphere humpbacks geographically, but they are not there at the same time. All Southern Hemisphere humpbacks share feeding grounds in the Antarctic south of 40°S and between 120°E and 110°W.

Based on the most recent status review of the humpback whale, we determined that the species consists of 14 DPSs.

Population Trends

Humpbacks are increasing in abundance in much of their range. While estimating humpback whale abundance is inherently difficult, the best population estimates for U.S. stocks of humpback whales can be found in our most recent stock assessment reports and the latest status review of the species.

Threats

Humpback whales face a series of threats including:

- entanglement in fishing gear (bycatch)
- ship strikes
- whale watch harassment
- habitat impacts
- harvest

Humpbacks can become entangled in fishing gear, either swimming off with the gear or becoming anchored. We have observed incidental "take" of humpback whales in the California/ Oregon swordfish and thresher shark drift gillnet fishery. Potential entanglement from gear from several fisheries can occur on their long

migration from Hawaii to Alaska. Humpbacks in Hawaii have been observed entangled in longline gear, crab pots, and other non-fishery-related lines.

Inadvertent ship strikes can injure or kill humpbacks. We have verified mortality related to ship strikes in the Gulf of Maine and in southeastern Alaska. Ship strikes have also been reported in Hawaii.

Whale watching vessels may stress or even strike whales. The Gulf of Maine stock is the focus of whale watching in New England from late spring to early fall, particularly within the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. The central North Pacific stock is the focus of a whale-watching industry on their wintering grounds in the Hawaiian Islands. The feeding aggregation in southeast Alaska is also the focus of a developing whale-watching industry that may impact whales in localized areas.

Shipping channels, fisheries, and aquaculture may occupy or destroy humpback whale aggregation areas. Recreational use of marine areas, including resort development and increased boat traffic, may displace whales that would normally use that area. In Hawaii, acoustic impacts from vessel operation, oceanographic research using active sonar, and military operations are also of increasing concern.

Japan has issued scientific permits in the Antarctic and in the western North Pacific in recent years. In 2009, the full JARPA II program commenced. Annual sample sizes for the full-scale research (lethal sampling) are set at 50 humpback whales. According to the IWC, Japan has refrained from taking humpback whales.

Conservation Efforts

Efforts to conserve humpback whales include:

- Reduce bycatch in gillnet and trap/pot fisheries in the western North Atlantic through the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan.
- Implement marine mammal take reduction measures identified in the Pacific Offshore Cetacean Take Reduction Plan.
- Mitigate ship strikes and respond to humpback whales in distress (see Alaska and Hawaii regulations).
- Educate whale watch vessels and boat operators on practicing safe boating around whales, such as through the Whale SENSE and See a Spout programs.

- Monitor humpbacks in U.S. waters via shipboard surveys and mark recapture studies.
- Research humpback population structure and abundance, though studies like the Structure of Populations, Levels of Abundance, and Status of Humpbacks (SPLASH) and More North Atlantic Humpbacks (MoNAH) projects, as well as work done at the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary.
- Recover the species [pdf]

Regulatory Overview

In 1946, the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling regulated commercial whaling of humpback whales.

In 1966, the International Whaling Commission prohibited commercial whaling of humpbacks.

In June 1970, humpback whales were designated as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Conservation Act (ESCA). In 1973, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) replaced the ESCA, and continued to list humpback whales as endangered.

In April 2015, we proposed to revise the ESA listing of the humpback whale by identifying 14 DPSs and listing 2 DPSs as threatened and 2 as endangered (80 FR 22304). The other 10 identified DPSs were not proposed for listing.

In September 2016, we revised the ESA listing for the humpback whale to identify 14 Distinct Population Segments (DPS), list 1 as threatened, 4 as endangered, and identify 9 others as not warranted for listing. We also issued two final rules governing approach of humpback whales in Alaska and Hawaii. The first re-codifies existing approach regulations in Alaskan waters under the ESA so they apply to both threatened and endangered humpback whales, and adds similar approach regulations under the MMPA to protect all humpback whales found off Alaska. The other is an interim final rule for approach regulations under the MMPA in Hawaiian waters to replace the previous regulations under the ESA. While the regulations are effective 30 days after their publication in the Federal Register, NOAA Fisheries is accepting public comment for 60 days after their publication and will publish a final rule in the future.

Under the MMPA, threats to humpback whales are mitigated by regulations implementing the Pacific Offshore Cetacean Take Reduction Plan and the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan.

Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Cetacea
Family: Balaenopteridae
Genus: *Megaptera*
Species: *novaeangliae*