



Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

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ALASKA BELUGA WHALE MANAGEMENT PLAN INTRODUCTION

Beluga whales in Alaska belong to two populations, one that spends the entire year in the Cook Inlet area and one that winters in the Bering Sea. The Cook Inlet population is made up of one stock while the Bering Sea population is made up of four stocks that migrate to traditional summering areas in Bristol Bay, the Yukon Delta and Norton Sound, the eastern Chukchi Sea, and the Beaufort Sea. Further studies are needed to document the movements, relationships, and accurate estimates of the size of these stocks.

Belugas are hunted in coastal Alaska from Cook Inlet to the Beaufort Sea. Belugas are an important traditional subsistence resource in many villages. In the village of Point Lay, for example, as much as 60% of the subsistence food can come from beluga whales in some years.

Beluga hunters and researchers have recently become concerned because of several events: organizations such as the International Whaling Commission have shown increased interest in managing Alaska beluga whales; large numbers of belugas have died in ice entrapments; increasing boating traffic seems to be keeping belugas from areas where they were once traditionally hunted; and reports of environmental contamination raise concerns about the health of belugas and the people eating them.

Representatives of beluga hunting villages and government agencies met in 1988 and formed the Alaska and Inuvialuit Beluga Whale Committee to address these concerns. In 1994, the structure and name of the committee changed slightly to better address regional concerns. The new name is the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC). The organization is dedicated to the conservation of beluga whales and their habitat, and preservation of the traditional beluga whale hunt. The best means to achieve these goals is through co-management of belugas between hunters and government agencies and self-regulation by groups of hunters. This management plan outlines the principles by which the members of the ABWC will manage beluga whales.

ALASKA BELUGA WHALE MANAGEMENT PLAN

PARTS OF THE PLAN

CONSERVATION: Maintain a healthy beluga whale resource for subsistence use and public enjoyment by future generations.

HARVESTING: Encourage the safe and efficient harvest, processing, and use of beluga whales and reduce the number of struck and lost whales through regional management plans.

USE: Ensure that belugas are used as fully as possible in a non-wasteful manner.

REPORTING AND MONITORING: Obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each region in order to provide information needed to make sound management decisions.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Educate and promote understanding about beluga issues among users, resource managers, and other interested groups.

RESEARCH: Obtain biological information necessary for sound management and conservation of beluga whales, and incorporate appropriate traditional knowledge.

ENFORCEMENT: Oversee enforcement of regional management plans and hunting guidelines, and promote enforcement of habitat protection laws, in order to maintain healthy populations of beluga whales for future generations and to ensure hunting opportunities for the subsistence users.

GOALS OF THE PLAN

- 1) To Maintain healthy populations of beluga whales in Alaskan waters.
- 2) Provide for adequate subsistence harvest of beluga whales and protect hunting privileges for Alaskan subsistence hunters.

I. CONSERVATION

Goal - Maintain a healthy beluga whale resource for subsistence use and public enjoyment by future generations.

A. Habitat Protection

1. Identify and protect areas that are important for calving, feeding, migrating, and other biological processes.
2. Identify concentration areas and suggest ways to mitigate impacts of industrial and commercial activities in these areas.

B. Establish a reasonable harvest level. The harvest level will be based on the number of animals in the populations and cultural and subsistence needs. In the absence of adequate biological information, the harvest will be based on current community needs.

C. Identify and monitor industrial and commercial activities which may adversely affect beluga whale populations and the ability of subsistence users to hunt belugas, and make recommendations to minimize the effect upon beluga whales and hunting.

D. Encourage the international exchange of information and development of joint management plans for shared beluga stocks.

E. Encourage and assist in developing regional management plans and co-management agreements with NOAA/NMFS.

II. HARVESTING

Goal - Encourage the safe and efficient harvest, processing, and use of beluga whales and reduce the number of struck and lost whales through regional management plans.

A. Subsistence hunting guidelines should be established for each stock of belugas by the villages hunting from that stock.

- B. Each region or village will include a section in their plans that shows steps needed to keep the number of struck and lost whales to a minimum.
- C. Subsistence uses of beluga whales in each region shall be determined by the affected region.

III. USE OF BELUGA WHALES

Goal - Ensure that belugas are used as fully as possible in a non-wasteful manner.

- A. Priority use shall be local consumption which includes traditional and customary use. This includes sharing, bartering, and customary trade of beluga products with other Alaska Natives that are non-commercial in nature.
- B. Other uses of belugas may be allowed as long as the subsistence priority is met, the use is legal under existing United States law, and only if the affected communities and the ABWC are consulted, involved, approve, and support the use. Such uses might include the following: 1) tourism, 2) live capture, and 3) take for scientific purposes.

IV. REPORTING AND MONITORING

Goal - Obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each region in order to provide information needed to make sound management decisions.

- A. Regional representatives will report all harvested and struck and lost belugas to the ABWC. This is to make sure that management decisions are made with correct and recent information. Whenever possible, forms will be filled out that will list the sex, length, color of the whale, area hunted, and information about hunting effort.
- B. Harvest monitors will be hired from villages whenever possible. They will collect harvest information, measure harvested belugas, and collect biological samples.
- C. Hunters will cooperate with the harvest monitors by providing harvest data and biological samples.

V. EDUCATION, INFORMATION, AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Goal - Educate and promote understanding about beluga issues among users, resource managers, and other interested groups.

- A. Promote hunter education to improve hunting and harvest methods and harvest reporting.
- B. Involve users and other interest groups in planning, prioritizing, and conducting research and in making regulations and management decisions.
- C. Provide information to the public, appropriate resource management agencies, or other interested parties and serve as a contact for exchange of information about beluga whales.
- D. Establish a training program to directly involve local people in harvest monitoring, sample collecting, and research.

VI. RESEARCH

Goal - Obtain biological information and traditional knowledge necessary for sound management and conservation of beluga whales.

- A. All beluga research should be done in consultation with the ABWC and representatives of local communities.
- B. The ABWC recommends the following types of biological research:
 - 1. Determine how many different stocks of belugas there are in Alaska.
 - 2. Develop population models for each stock of belugas. To create these models, the following information is required: population size, birth rate, sex and age composition, age of sexual maturity, and mortality.
 - 3. Determine effects of man-made disturbance and noise.
 - 4. Determine migration routes of all stocks.

5. Identify critical areas for calving, migration, and feeding.
6. Examine the interactions between fisheries and belugas.
7. Determine harmful contaminants in belugas.
8. Compile and incorporate traditional knowledge about beluga whales into research.

C. The ABWC recommends the following types of subsistence studies:

1. Document the use of belugas, how they are hunted, and their cultural and subsistence importance to beluga-hunting communities in Alaska.
2. Identify user groups.
3. Compile information from beluga whale harvest forms about where hunts take place, types of hunts, numbers of hours hunted, etc.
4. Conduct a feasibility study, upon request, on other potential uses of belugas including tourism and live capture.

VII. ENFORCEMENT

Goal - Oversee enforcement of regional management plans and hunting guidelines, and promote enforcement of habitat protection laws, in order to maintain healthy populations of beluga whales for future generations and to ensure future hunting opportunities for the subsistence users.

- A. Each region, through consultation with the ABWC, will establish the enforcement procedures for their regional plans and for any agreements entered into with management agencies.
- B. The ABWC Hearing Committee, consisting of the ABWC Executive Committee and appropriate regional and hunter representatives, will hold a special hearing if there is an infraction left unresolved at the regional level. The Hearing Committee will decide on the infraction in a timely manner.
- C. If a person willfully disregards the decision of the ABWC Hearing Committee, the ABWC will refer the infraction to the NMFS enforcement agency.

CERTIFICATION

We do hereby certify that the foregoing Alaska Beluga Whale Management Plan was adopted as amended at a duly convened meeting of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee on December 1, 1995. The quorum was present, and the Plan was approved by a unanimous vote in favor of adoption.

Rosswell Schaeffer
Chairman

Attested by:
Kathryn J. Frost
Secretary

The following organizations and villages have accepted the Management Plan:

NSB Fish & Game Management Committee	7/14/94
Little Diomedea	1994
Native Village of Hooper Bay	11/21/96
Native Village of Kotlik	11/21/96
Native Village of Dillingham (Curyung)	11/25/96
Native Village of Kotzebue	11/25/96
Native Village of Shaktoolik	11/25/96
Native Village of Manokotak	11/26/96
Native Village of Elim	11/27/96
Native Village of Noatak	11/29/96
Native Village of Buckland	12/2/96
Native Village of Kivalina	12/2/96
Native Village of Point Lay	12/2/96
Native Village of Saint Michael	12/2/96
Native Village of Scammon Bay	12/2/96
Native Village of Koyuk	12/3/96
Native Village of Unalakleet	12/3/96
Native Village of Stebbins	12/4/96
Native Village of Clark's Point	1/14/97
Native Village of Togiak	2/10/97
Native Village of Barrow	2/25/97
Native Village of Chevak	2/26/97
Native Village of Emmonak	10/14/97
Alakanuk Tribal Council	10/20/97
Native Village of Point Hope	11/17/97
Native Village of Levelock	11/18/97
Native Village of South Naknek	6/30/00