

## Frequently Asked Questions

### The Pacific Walrus Haulout Near Point Lay, Alaska

**Q.** Why do walrus use coastal haulouts?

**A.** Walrus need to rest between feeding bouts. Feeding bouts consist of diving to the sea floor to locate prey such as clams, snails, and worms and repeatedly surfacing and diving until full. They will haulout to rest on sea ice when available or on land when there is no ice. Adult females with dependent young (newborns to 3 year-olds) and sub-adults prefer to rest on ice floes and migrate to the Chukchi Sea in the spring with the receding pack ice. Most adult males remain in the Bering Sea year-round where ice forms only in the winter and they rest on land during the summer.

**Q.** Is the Point Lay haulout unusual?

**A.** Yes and no. No in terms of relatively rare past events, and yes in terms of the timing, location, and number of animals involved. Records suggest that large haulouts occurred in 1930-1932 and again in 1978 on St. Lawrence Island and the neighboring Penuk Islands in late fall. The 1978 event was well documented and may have involved 50,000-60,000 animals that were migrating south at the time. The majority of those animals were weak and emaciated and about 1000 died at the haulouts. It is thought that the Pacific walrus population had likely exceeded the carrying capacity of their habitat sometime around 1975-1980. The haulouts that have formed near Point Lay in 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2014 were composed of 20,000-40,000 animals at their peak and have developed earlier in mid-August and September in direct response to the complete absence of sea ice in the Chukchi Sea. In general, the animals at Point Lay have been healthy and fat and either feed just off shore or travel north about 150 miles to Hanna Shoal to feed.

**Q.** Is the Point Lay haulout connected to global warming?

**A.** Most likely. Sea ice extent has been steadily declining in the Arctic since 1979 along with increasing sea surface temperatures and air temperatures. The effects of global warming are amplified in the Arctic which is warming at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world.

**Q.** What is the size and composition of the walrus herd that uses the Point Lay haulout?

**A.** Walrus haulouts can be very dynamic and wax and wane as animals come to rest then leave to feed and the Point Lay haulout is no exception. Peak numbers have ranged from 20,000-40,000 animals. Most of these are adult females with dependent young, sub-adults (<6 years old), and a few adult males.

**Q.** What causes walrus to stampede when on coastal haulouts?

**A.** Walrus are easily frightened when on coastal haulouts and tend to pack closely together so that a flight response by one animal can quickly travel through the herd, resulting in a mass exodus to the water. The sounds and odors of humans, machinery, and bears are most often associated with

disturbance events. Aircraft flying nearby or even at a distance, particularly helicopters can spook walrus. Disturbances have also been attributed to birds and small mammals.

**Q.** What can be done to protect walrus at these haulouts?

**A.** The most immediate action is to keep disturbances from happening. To that end, the Service and the Native Village of Point Lay have taken several measures to protect the haulout. The Federal Aviation Administration issues a notice to pilots about the existence of the haulout with guidelines for operations in that area, local commercial airline carriers are also notified and use alternate approaches to the airport, the U.S. Coast Guard also alerts mariners. The Native Village of Point Lay monitors the haulout, collects biological samples, collects data on mortalities and controls access to the site. The Eskimo Walrus Commission (<http://www.kawerak.org/ewc.html>) passed a resolution concerning hunting at Chukchi Sea coastal haulouts.

**Q.** Have there been any stampedes at this haulout?

**A.** Disturbances have been kept to a minimum in large part due to the actions outlined above. However, it is not possible to keep bears and other wildlife from the area. As of 2014, no stampedes have occurred that have resulted large mortality events.

**Q.** How does the current situation compare to previous years?

**A.** The haulout that formed this year was within the time period of past haulouts (mid-August/September – mid-October), was similar in size at its peak (20,000 – 40,000 animals), and did not form until ice in the Chukchi Sea was completely melted for 1-2 weeks. In addition, the sex and age composition was similar. The largest differences are in the exact location of the haulout site.

**Q.** Do walrus use the same haulout areas from year to year?

**A.** Yes, haulouts tend to be used repeatedly over many years. However, continued disturbances have caused some haulouts to be abandoned. In addition, walrus's likely shift to other haulouts as repeated use of one can result in the depletion of nearby prey.

**Q.** Is the use of the Point Lay haulout related to a population decline or increase?

**A.** That is hard to answer. We have no good real estimates of population size or trend. The best evidence suggests the population declined from 1975-2000 and has been relatively stable since 2001. However, it is unlikely that the haulout is in response to a change in population size. However, a change in population size would likely be reflected in the number of animals that use the haulout.

**Q.** Why do some walrus prefer sea ice to haulout on?

**A.** Adult females with dependent young and sub-adults likely prefer sea ice habitats for several reasons including: (1) they can spread out in relatively small groups across the ice pack, maintaining the advantages that comes with group vigilance while decreasing agnostic interactions, the chance of injuring smaller animals, and feeding pressure on any specific area; (2) when hungry they can simply

leave the ice and dive to the sea floor to feed; (3) if disturbed they have direct access to the water and numerous escape routes; (4) ice provides some protection from most predators (killer whales, man and other terrestrial predators); (5) ice covered seas are relatively calm during storms and pressure ridges and other irregularities block winds; (6) calves with limited swimming and diving are closer to resting sites when in the water; (7) large, densely packed herds on land are dangerous for smaller animals, particularly if adult males are present; and (8) the constant shifting of ice floes due to winds and currents can transport animals to new areas for feeding.

**Q.** Are there potential problems for walrus that make feeding trips to Hana Shoal from the Point Lay haulout?

**A.** Yes, but this has yet to be confirmed. In general, walrus that use the Point Lay haulout spend more time swimming and feeding and less time resting than when on ice floes. Walrus swimming to Hanna Shoal to feed likely expend more energy than when feeding from ice floes or closer to the haulout. However, the energetics of any animal is a balancing act between intake and expenditures. We do not know if animals gain enough energy while feeding at Hanna Shoal to off-set the cost of going there and back. Because this behavior has been observed over several years it is more likely than not that going to Hanna Shoal is profitable at least for some animals.

**Q.** Are there equivalent haulouts on the Russian Chukchi Sea coast?

**A.** Yes. There are four haulout sites that Russian biologists try to monitor each year. As in Alaska, walrus don't show up there in large numbers until the sea ice has completely melted. In general, both Russian and Alaskan walrus eventually converge at Cape Serdtse-Kamen in October-November before the southward migration starts in earnest. In 2010, Russian biologists estimated that there were 120,000+ animals at Cape Serdtse-Kamen at peak occupancy.