



# Pacific Walrus

## *Use of Coastal Haulouts along the Chukchi Sea Coast*

### Historical background

Pacific walruses (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) have always used coastal haulouts for resting during their fall southward migration. Adult males which are suited to spending long periods in ice free waters routinely use coastal haulouts along the Bering Sea in both Russia and the United States during the summer months.

However, adult females and young migrate to the Chukchi Sea for the summer and prefer to rest on ice floes until they begin to migrate back to the Bering Sea for the winter. Ice floes provide protection from predators, allow herds to haul out in smaller groups, and provide easy access to feeding areas below. During the southern migration females and young use coastal haulouts along the way as they move in advance of the developing ice, but groups are relatively small and they only stay on land for a few days.

### Response to the loss of sea ice

Ice in the Chukchi Sea typically reaches its minimum annual extent in mid-September. Historically some ice always remained over the shallow and productive continental shelf of the Chukchi Sea providing preferred habitat. In 2007 sea ice completely melted out of the Chukchi Sea and the ice edge retreated far to the north over the deep Arctic Basin waters. During that time, several groups of walruses came to shore



USFWS

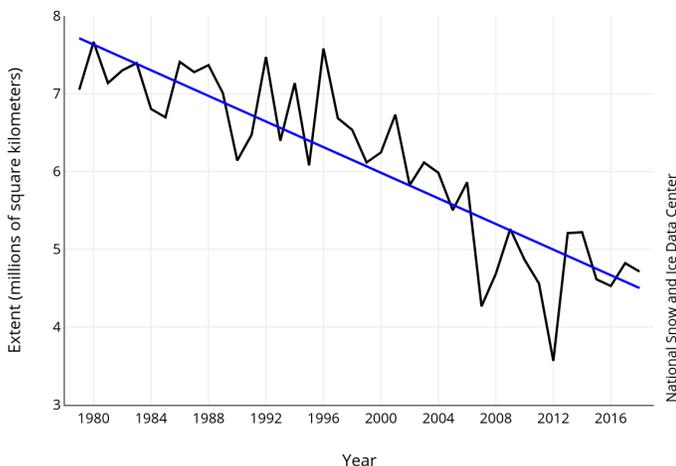
*Pacific walrus haulout near Point Lay, Alaska.*

to haul out in various places from Cape Lisburne to Wainwright along the Alaska coast as well as several spots along the Russian coast. This was an unusual occurrence for Alaska in terms of the timing, number of sites occupied, and the number of animals involved.

Since 2010 a consistent pattern of walrus response to the seasonal loss of ice in the Chukchi Sea has emerged. Hanna Shoal is an area of shallow water in the

northeast Chukchi Sea that contains abundant walrus prey and is one of the last places to lose sea ice in the summer. Due to the amount of prey and persistence of remnant sea ice, walruses tend to concentrate in the Hanna Shoal area using these floes until they disappear. In 10 of the last 12 years, ice has completely melted out of the continental shelf waters of the Chukchi Sea in late summer, and walruses have hauled out to rest on the Alaska coast in

Average Monthly Arctic Sea Ice Extent  
September 1979 - 2018



National Snow and Ice Data Center



USFWS

*Pacific walruses resting on sea ice.*



Sergiy Kavry

*A polar bear causes a disturbance on a Russian Haulout*

large numbers. Many walrus seem to prefer to haul out on the barrier islands just north of the Native Village of Point Lay, Alaska. This site has been occupied by as many as 20,000 – 40,000 animals at its peak; unusually large concentrations for Alaska. In recent years, walrus have begun occupying the Point Lay haulout site beginning in August and either feeding close by or making trips back and forth to the Hanna Shoal area, about 180 miles each way. These long distance foraging trips may be especially difficult for females with dependent young. By mid October the Point Lay haulout is abandoned and most of the animals will move south toward Cape Lisburne then west to the Russian coast.

### Haulout Management

Walrus are easily disturbed when hauled out on land which can lead to large stampedes into the water that may injure and kill some animals, particularly yearlings and calves. Large predators are attracted to land haulouts and can panic the herd. The smell and sight of people, machines, domestic animals, etc. can also result in a mass exodus to the sea. Aircraft overflights, can be a major source of disturbance.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partners have taken steps to keep these disturbances to a minimum. The Service has worked with the Federal Aviation Administration to identify frequently used haulouts on aeronautical charts and develop guidelines for pilots operating near haulouts. The Eskimo Walrus Commission adopted a resolution in 2008 concerning subsistence hunting at Chukchi Sea haulouts. Most importantly, Point Lay residents have adopted a haulout stewardship role to protect the haulout, which includes monitoring and collecting biological data and samples.

Similar programs are in place in Russia and all have been successful at reducing human-caused disturbance events.

The service has developed the following guidelines for operation of aircraft and marine vessels around coastal haulouts.

- Pilots of single engine aircraft and UAS devices should not knowingly fly over or fly within 1/2 mile of walrus hauled out on land or ice to avoid causing a disturbance. If weather or aircraft safety require flight operations within 1/2 mile of walrus, small single engine aircraft should maintain a 2000' minimum altitude. Pilots of helicopters and multi-engine aircraft should not knowingly fly over or fly within 1 mile of walrus hauled out on land or ice to avoid causing a disturbance. If aircraft safety requires flight operations within 1 mile of walrus, helicopters and multi-engine aircraft should maintain a 3000' minimum altitude. Please be aware that some locations have stricter requirements (such as Round Island which has a 5,000' AGL and 3 mile restriction April 1 – November 30) check with the applicable land manager.
- Landings and take-offs should take place at least 1/2 mile distance from hauled out walrus. Please be aware that some locations have prohibitions on landing and takeoffs, check with the applicable land manager.
- Walrus are particularly sensitive to changes in engine noise and are more likely to stampede off beaches when planes turn or fly low overhead. Aerial photography and/or circling of manned aircraft or unmanned aircraft systems (drones) within the vicinity of a walrus haulout poses a high potential for disturbance and is specifically discouraged. Marine vessels should

maintain a buffer from walrus hauled out on land or ice to avoid disturbance:

- Marine vessels 50 feet in length or less should remain at least 0.5 miles away from hauled out walrus.
- Marine vessels 50 – 100 feet should remain at least 1 mile from hauled out walrus.
- Due to the unusually large number of walrus using the Point Lay haulout, the community requests that marine vessels remain a minimum of 5 miles offshore when walrus are present.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibits the TAKE of all marine mammal species in U.S. waters. TAKE is defined as “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal.” Harassment is defined in the MMPA as “any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild; or has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering.” TAKE is further defined by regulation to include feeding or attempting to feed a marine mammal in the wild. Some exceptions are made for authorized scientific research and subsistence hunting by Alaska Natives.

For more information, contact:

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Alaska**  
 1011 E. Tudor Road  
 Anchorage, Alaska 99503  
 907/786 3800  
<http://alaska.fws.gov>

**August 2019**