

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

FEATURE MATERIAL

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## GLIMMER OF HOPE FOR WORLD'S WALRUS POPULATIONS

The world's populations of walrus, while close to extinction in some areas, are showing signs of a comeback, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The range of the two forms of walrus--the Atlantic and the Pacific--encircles the polar basin, but there are far more Pacific walrus than Atlantic. The differences between the two are the longer tusks and larger body of the Pacific walrus.

An annual report summarizing developments concerning marine mammals has been published in the Federal Register as required by the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972. The report describes the worldwide status of the Atlantic and Pacific walrus.

In the Pacific, where walrus numbers were 40,000 to 50,000 as recently as the early 1950's, it is estimated there are now about 140,000, and biologists believe these numbers are increasing. They warn, however, that this will not continue if the annual Siberian and Alaskan native kill of 5,000-6,000 a year in Alaska and the Soviet Union is increased. The entire Pacific walrus population winters in the pack ice of the Bering Sea, with spring migration north through the Bering Strait as the ice breaks up.

In the Atlantic, the latest figures estimate the walrus population to be on the order of 25,000 in two groups--from the Kara Sea to eastern Greenland and from western Greenland to eastern Canada. They, too, migrate north-south with the edge of the ice cap. The average annual Eskimo and

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native kill of Atlantic walrus is now about 2,700, and the reproductive rate is estimated to be just a little more than that, at around 3,000 to 5,000 a year. Any increase in kills would seriously jeopardize this subspecies. Herds in the Barents, Kara, and White Seas are close to extinction now.

Since 1956 the U.S.S.R. has prohibited all hunting of Atlantic and Pacific walrus except that necessary for Eskimo survival. Atlantic walrus hunting is limited by Denmark to Greenland residents using craft under 40 tons; hunting areas and dates are regulated. Canada restricts hunting to Eskimos and a few white residents.

Trophy hunting of the Pacific walrus in Alaska was stopped by the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972. The Secretary of the Interior has denied all requested trophy hunting permits which were available to whites under the economic hardship clause of the Act. Eskimos and Aleuts are permitted to hunt the Pacific walrus in Alaskan waters under the Act.

The walrus is a marine mammal known as pinnipeds--pinna meaning wing or fin and pedis meaning foot. Their generic name, odobenus, means "tooth-walker." Their long tusks are used for fighting, for climbing on land and ice, and for emergencies like rescuing a pup from an ice crevice. Tusks are not used for eating. At birth a walrus weighs from 85 to 140 pounds and by two years, 750. Old male Pacific walruses have attained 4,000 pounds and females, 2,000.

Walruses feed mainly on clams but also eat snails, crabs, worms, and occasionally an adult male will eat seal flesh. They have a greater specific gravity than water and must rest on ice or land frequently, although pouches may be inflated to enable them to sleep while floating upright at sea.

Calves are dependent on their mothers for at least 18 months and occasionally for as long as two and a half years. Most females do not begin to breed until six or seven years of age. Mating occurs during February and March. Growth of the fetus, which is delayed, does not begin until about June, and the actual growth period is about 10 months. Most cows do not breed again until the year following the birth of their last calf.

The Atlantic and Pacific walruses' eating habits could pose ecological problems for the mammals if offshore drilling for oil in the Bering Sea or Arctic Ocean is undertaken, or if the extensive clam beds in these areas are subject to dredging.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has established a walrus research program to complement the State of Alaska's. Other studies are underway and supported by the Sea Grant Program of the University of Alaska.

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