

Marine Mammal Program

Branch of Coastal & Marine Resources Ecological Services



Terry Debragne/USFWS

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Marine Mammals

Marine mammals rely on the ocean for their survival and vary widely in taxa, habitat, and behavior. Authority to manage marine mammals is divided between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), in consultation with the Marine Mammal Commission. FWS provides leadership in the conservation and management of 10 stocks of marine mammals in U.S. waters.

Overview of the Marine Mammal Program

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972 established a moratorium on taking and importing marine mammals, including parts and products. The MMPA assigned the Secretary of the Interior, delegated to FWS, all responsibility, authority, funding, and duties for the conservation and management of marine mammals under our jurisdiction in U.S. waters - polar bears, walruses, sea otters, and manatees - and the marine ecosystems that support them.

Our work to conserve and manage marine mammals includes: (1) managing the "take" (i.e., hunting, killing, capture, and/or harassment) of marine mammals through permits and authorizations, (2) providing financial assistance to eligible marine mammal stranding participants to support all aspects of response to the stranding of certain marine mammals and for related scientific research, and (3) working with a range of partners to ensure optimum sustainable population levels for marine mammal stocks.



Lillian Carswell/USFWS

Sea otters have the densest fur of any mammal

To achieve these goals, FWS surveys and assesses population status and trends for marine mammals, maintains Stock Assessment Reports for marine mammal stocks under our jurisdiction, provides financial assistance to stranding networks through the Prescott Grant Program, and facilitates the development and implementation of conservation plans.

Stock Assessment Reports

One of the goals of the MMPA is to ensure that stocks of marine mammals occurring in U.S. waters do not diminish below their optimum sustainable population. In order to evaluate the status of marine mammals, section 117 of the MMPA mandates the development of Stock Assessment Reports (SARs). SARs are based on the most up-to-date scientific information available and are prepared in consultation with regional scientific review groups with input from the public.

Marine Mammal Species



Steve Hillebranch/USFWS

Manatees congregating at warm-water refugia site, Three Sisters Springs

West Indian manatees (*Trichechus manatus*): There are two subspecies of West Indian manatees: the Antillean manatee and the Florida manatee. Due to their diet consisting of seagrasses and aquatic plants, manatees are nicknamed sea cows. Manatees are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Threats include habitat loss, food scarcity, cold stress, and boat strikes.



USGS

Polar bear cubs emerging from their den in the spring

Polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) are dependent on sea ice and their native range lies throughout the Arctic Circle. There are 19 subpopulations through the Arctic and the U.S. manages two subpopulations: the Chukchi Sea stock and the Southern Beaufort Sea stock. These top predators prey mainly on ringed seals and are protected under the ESA. Sea ice loss due to climate change is one of the major threats to the species.

Southern sea otters (*Enhydra lutris nereis*) live and feed in waters along the central California coast, prey on marine invertebrates, and play a significant role as keystone species in these kelp forests and seagrass beds. These social animals are known for using tools, such as a rock, to break open hard-shelled prey. Protected under the ESA, major threats include oil spills, food limitations, pollutants, and pathogens.



Scott Clark

Sea otters can use tools like rocks to break open shellfish

Northern sea otters (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*) extend from Alaska's Aleutian Islands through British Columbia and Washington. There are four stocks of Northern sea otters under FWS' jurisdiction, the Washington stock, Southeast Alaska stock, Southcentral Alaska stock, and the Southwest Alaska stock, which is the only stock currently protected under the ESA. Northern sea otters are larger than the Southern subspecies and are susceptible to predation from killer whales, wolves, bears, and eagles.

Similar to the Southern subspecies, they are threatened by oil spills, food limitations, pollutants, and pathogens.



Joel Gortlich-Miller/USFWS

The walrus is a social animal and spends much of its time on sea ice.

Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) ranges across the Bering and Chukchi Seas, inhabiting shallow continental shelf waters, and foraging primarily on benthic invertebrates. Between feeding bouts, they can be found resting on sea ice or on land. Human-caused disturbances during these coastal haulouts are an emerging conservation and management concern.

John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue and Response Grant Program

In 2000, the Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Act amended the MMPA to establish the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue and Response Grant Program. The goal of the program is to improve our nation's ability to rescue, rehabilitate, and conserve marine mammals. NOAA Fisheries has distributed Prescott grants since 2001. In 2020, Congress began appropriating funds to FWS to implement the program.



Terri Cullison/USFWS

Funds from the Prescott Grant Program provide much needed support to manatee rescue and rehabilitation efforts in Florida

Funds provided under the program are distributed equitably among the designated stranding regions and prioritized based on the species' needs at that time.

Through the Prescott Grant Program, FWS has awarded more than \$5.2 million to conservation organizations and state agencies from 2020-2023.

FWS Marine Mammal Management Contacts

Ecological Services Headquarters

- Coordinates national MMPA objectives and provides support to the regions

Alaska Marine Mammals Management Office

- Manages and supports polar bear, Northern sea otter, and Pacific walrus conservation
- Promotes international coordination between the U.S., Russian Federation, Norway, Greenland, and Canada
- Co-manages subsistence hunting and other activities with Alaska Native peoples

Washington Fish and Wildlife Office

- Manages and supports Northern sea otter conservation

Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office

- Manages and supports Southern sea otter conservation and recovery

Florida Ecological Services Office

- Manages protection, recovery, stranding response, and rehabilitation of the Florida manatee

Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office

- Manages protection, recovery, stranding response, and rehabilitation of the Antillean manatee

Contact the appropriate office for species and region specific needs and questions

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Ecological Services
5275 Leesburg Pike
Falls Church, VA 22041
www.fws.gov/program/marine-mammals**

May 2024

