

HUMPBACK WHALES: MORE THAN JUST A SPECIAL CONCERN

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Executive Summary: The North Pacific population of Humpback whales has been increasing and thus SARA is considering a reassessment from threatened to special concern. Because of a potential increase in oil tanker traffic through their habitat, we need to ensure they remain legally protected.

Introduction:

The first half of the century saw a drastic reduction in the Northern Pacific Humpback Population due to the whaling industry. Population numbers in British Columbia dropped down to ~4,000 whales. In 1966, the International Whaling Commission banned hunting. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) also bans any trade of Humpback Whales. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessed Humpback whales as threatened in 1982, and re-classified them as special concern in 2011. COSEWIC cited increases in population numbers as the reason for the placement into a lower risk category. A paper using photo-identification methods produced an estimate of approximately 20,000 individuals from data collected in 2004-2006, and a population growth rate of 4.9-6.8% per year (Calambokidis 2009). The Species At Risk Act (SARA) has listed the Northern Pacific population as threatened but in response to COSEWIC, is considering changing its status, and with it the level of protection, to special concern.



Current Protection:

CITES: ban on trade of whales or any part of whale

COSEWIC: special concern as of 2011

SARA: threatened as of 2015

THREATS:

- Ship strikes
- Entanglement
- Toxic spills
- Noise pollution

So what's the issue?

Currently, the Canadian government is considering downgrading the status of Humpbacks whales from threatened to special concern. Ultimately this means their habitat would no longer have legal protection. There has been speculation that this is due to the desire to move oil tankers through the migration pathways of Humpbacks. While population numbers have increased, recovering does not constitute a recovered population. Humpback whales use B.C. waters as a vital feeding ground in the summer, as well as migratory pathways along the coastline and thus must be legally protected.

THREATENED:

Legal protection

“You cannot kill, harm or trade the species and you cannot damage or destroy its residence”

Recovery strategy within 2 years of listing

VS.

SPECIAL CONCERN:

No legal protection

Protection against harm of species or its habitat **do not** apply

Management plan within three years of listing

RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLICATIONS:

1. REDUCE SHIPPING DURING TIMES OF YEAR WHEN FEEDING/MIGRATION OCCURS

- *Reducing the likelihood of ship strikes*

2. PREVENT NORTHERN GATEWAY PIPELINE IN ORDER TO DECREASE RISK OF OIL SPILLS

- *Reducing direct implications to health & survival as well as habitat degradation*

3. PROTECT HABITAT IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN PREY SPECIES

- *Humpbacks are prey-selective, and are dependent on specific species, thus by protecting their habitats we are also protecting whales*

4. KEEP THREATENED STATUS ON SARA SO THEY HAVE LEGAL PROTECTION

- *Legal protection of both whales and their habitat is critical to ensure the continued recovery of this culturally important species*

References:

Calambokidis J (2009) Abundance estimates of humpback and blue whales off the US West Coast based on mark-recapture of photo-identified individuals through 2008. *Cascadia Research*
Ottawa removes humpback whales off threatened species list for same area vital to Northern Gateway Pipeline project (2014) *National Post*
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COSEWIC (2011) Wildlife Species search. Retrieved 1Dec2015 from <http://www.cosewic.gc.ca/eng/>