

SUBMISSION TO THE
NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD
June 2021

For

Information: **X**

Decision:

Issue: Bowhead Carcass Report, Kitikmeot Region

Potential Issue(s) or impact(s):

- The Kurtairojuark Hunters and Trappers Organization (KHTO) reported another bowhead carcass on April 14th 2021 to Government of Nunavut located near Toloyoak.
- This is the eleventh bowhead whale carcass reported in the Gulf of Boothia since October 2020, all within a 200km radius of Kugaaruk, NU (Figure 1).
- Possible causes for these bowhead mortalities include: contaminants, starvation (poor body condition), algae poisoning, disease, and killer whale predation. KHTO notes that there is an abandoned Dew Line Site nearby and in Aug. 2018 a cruise ship ran aground in the area.
- DFO and the KHTO are gathering additional information about this unusual mortality event, to inform next steps in responding to this recent carcass report.

Provincial / Territorial / International communications necessary / completed

- DFO has updated co-management organizations and Regional Communications as more information becomes available.
- Alaska has recorded bowhead Unusual Mortality Events in the past and has provided recommendations on response measures.
- A request to provide the International Whaling Commission with an update is being considered.

Science Response:

- Due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, Science staff are unable to visit the region and thus cannot perform a necropsy which would assist in determining cause of death. Science has contracts in place with the local HTO to collect samples from all bowhead carcasses. Given the remote locations, extreme weather, and condition of the carcasses, sample and data collection has been challenging.
- Samples from eight out of the eleven carcasses have been received at the Freshwater Institute, Winnipeg and await processing. Arrangements are being made to obtain additional samples from the recently reported carcass.

- Results will be communicated to the community once science staff are able to conduct laboratory analyses. Additional sample analysis are planned including baleen sampling, fat analysis, and hormone assessment.
- Tissue samples from seven of the whales were sent for inspection by a veterinarian and reports indicate no obvious underlying health concerns or evidence of starvation as a cause of death.
- Early indications suggest killer whale predation from hunter observations of missing tongues, scars, and relatively small size (young) of whales. However, a final determination of cause of death may be difficult due to the condition of whales.

Media Attention:

- Some media attention in November when the first whales were observed, but none since.

Next Step(s):

- DFO and KHTO members are in regular contact and have coordinated sample collection from carcasses. DFO Science has used community-based sample collection funding to assist with the stranding response.
- To estimate absolute numbers of whales that died, DFO science has purchased satellite images of the area. Due to high costs and not knowing whether carcasses can be identified from images, 3-5% of the coastline including areas where carcasses were previously found were selected for purchase. Results of the image analysis may provide an estimate of missing carcasses and whether a survey of the region during the summer is necessary to determine total numbers of bowhead mortalities.

Prepared by:

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Date:

30 April 2021

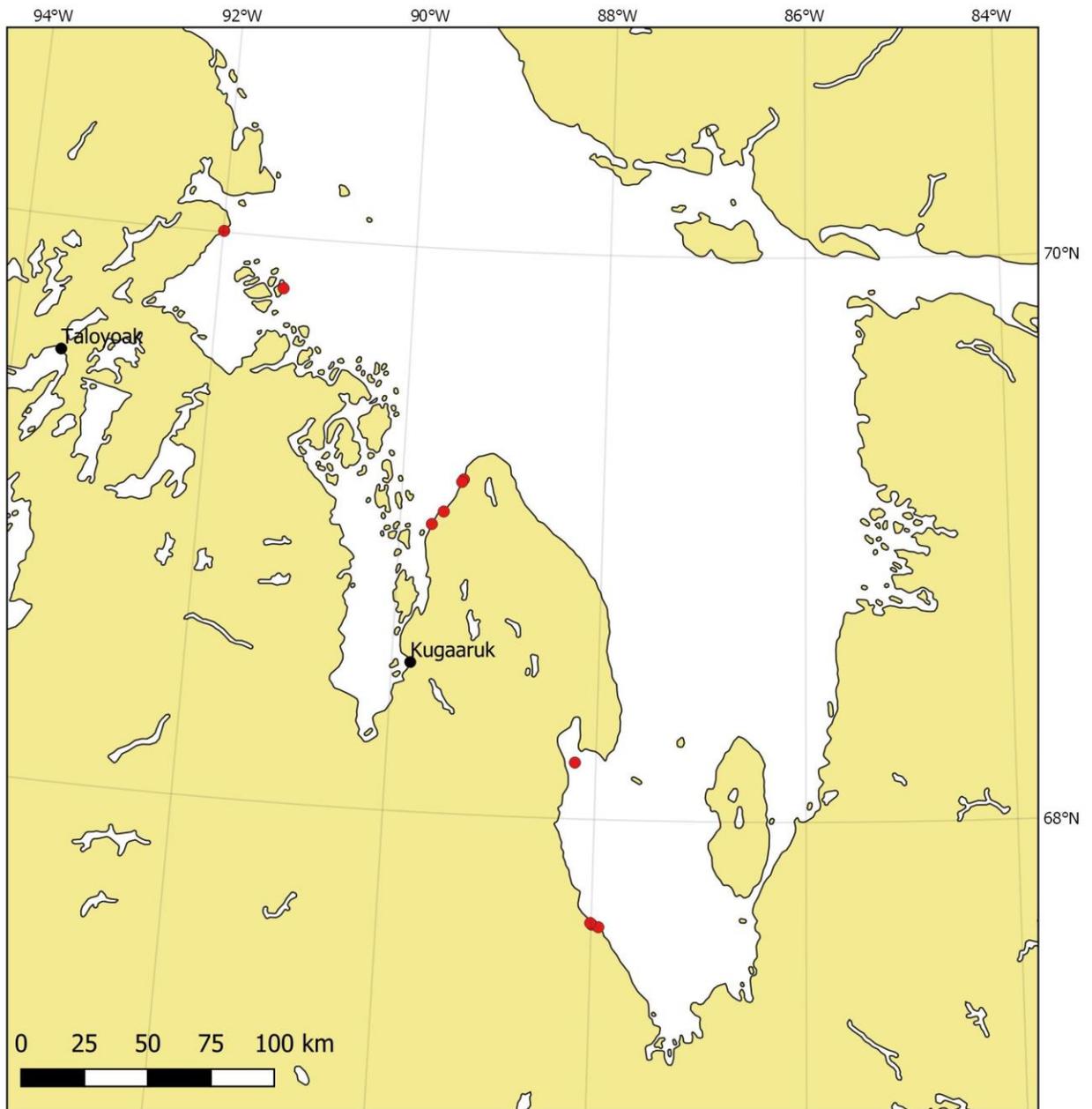


Figure 1. Locations of bowhead whale carcasses in the Gulf of Boothia reported between October 2020 and April 2021.