

Summary of COSEWIC Assessment and Update Status Report on the Bowhead Whale in Canada

Bowhead Whales occur in Arctic and subarctic marine waters and in conditions ranging from open water to thick extensive (but unconsolidated) pack ice. There are two recognized populations in Canada: the Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort population summers in the eastern Beaufort Sea and Amundsen Gulf and winters in the Bering Sea. The Eastern Canada-West Greenland population summers mainly in northwestern Hudson Bay, Foxe Basin, the Lancaster Sound region (including Prince Regent Inlet and Gulf of Boothia) and western Baffin Bay and winters mainly in Hudson and Davis Straits.

The bowhead Whale is a large, long-lived species with low fecundity and high adult survival. It has a fairly narrow feeding niche in high northern latitudes and can be affected by a range of human activities (e.g., by disturbance from shipping, and offshore oil and gas development, and hunting). Reduction in sea ice is likely to affect Bowhead Whales because of greater exposure to human activities.

Status (Eastern Canada-West Greenland population):

Special Concern

Status History:

The “Eastern and Western Arctic populations” were given a single designation of Endangered in April 1980. They were split into two populations (Eastern Arctic and Western Arctic) to allow separate designations in April 1986. The Eastern Arctic population was not re-evaluated in April 1986, but retained the Endangered status of the original “Eastern and Western Arctic populations”. The Eastern Arctic population was further split into two populations (Hudson Bay-Foxe basin population and Davis Strait-Baffin Bay population) in May 2005, and each was designated Threatened. In April 2009, the Hudson Bay-Foxe Basin population and the Davis Strait-Baffin Bay population were considered a single unit and this Eastern Canada-West Greenland population was designated Special Concern.

Reasons for designation:

The population was severely depleted by commercial whaling, starting in the 1500s and continuing until about 1910. Since the early 1900s, it has been subject only to sporadic hunting by Inuit in Canada and Greenland. In the absence of commercial whaling, the population is believed to have been increasing for decades and is likely still increasing. This increase is supported by evidence from both Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK) and science. Current total abundance is estimated at around 6000. In spite of the increase, the population is not yet clearly secure because of its life history (e.g. long generation time, very low natural growth rate). Additionally, there is uncertainty about how bowheads will respond to the rapid changes in their habitat due to climate change and increasing human activities such as shipping and oil exploration in high latitudes. Such habitat changes have already begun to occur and will intensify

over the next 100 years. In view of the species' life history, it is important that hunting continue to be monitored and managed to ensure against over harvest.