

Consultations related to possible listing of Cumberland Sound beluga and Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay beluga under the *Species at Risk Act*

CUMBERLAND SOUND BELUGA

2004-05

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) representatives met with the Board of the Pangnirtung Hunters and Trappers Organization (HTO) and the community in November 2004 to ask whether they supported the Cumberland Sound beluga population being listed as Threatened under the *Species at Risk Act*. DFO gave a presentation explaining the Species at Risk process and what would happen if the beluga population was listed, and summarizing the beluga recovery and management planning activities that were underway in their community and how their HTO had been involved.

Participants asked why the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) had originally designated the Cumberland Sound population as Endangered. DFO explained that at the time of the previous COSEWIC assessment in 1990, belugas throughout southeast Baffin Island were thought to belong to one population which was hunted by three communities. The numbers of belugas taken by Kimmirut, Iqaluit and Pangnirtung were thought to be high relative to the size of the population. Based on more recent research, the Cumberland Sound population is now thought to be distinct from others in the region. Participants said that belugas that show up on the west side of Cumberland Sound do not belong to the local population; those whales are hunted by Iqaluit and Kimmirut hunters and should not be included in their quota. DFO responded that it is currently working with the Pangnirtung HTO to biopsy whales in western Cumberland Sound to determine their genetic affiliation. Those whales are difficult to biopsy so it may take several years to gather a sufficient number of samples to get a clear answer. Participants asked when the next DFO survey was planned. DFO responded that a survey was scheduled for summer 2005.

Numerous participants expressed concern that listing would affect their way of life by limiting or denying them access to beluga meat and *maqtaq*. DFO explained that if listing occurs it would likely have little, if any, effect on the subsistence hunt because the current harvest is low enough to allow recovery to occur over the long term. DFO elaborated that listing would require the development of a recovery strategy, which had been started in 2002 with two HTO representatives participating on the recovery team. If listing occurs, the current draft of the Strategy would allow the subsistence hunt to be maintained as long as it continues to be carefully managed and would not result in a decline in the beluga population or delay its recovery. The meeting participants were informed that a beluga management plan, co-chaired by DFO and the HTO, was also under development to ensure the hunt continues to be managed on a sustainable basis.

During the Pangnirtung HTO Board meeting and the public meeting, and in one consultation workbook received from that community, participants said they were not in favour of listing for several reasons. Firstly, some people don't believe the population is at risk at this time because they have seen abundant numbers of belugas in Cumberland Sound within the past year. Secondly, before adding this population to the SARA legal list, a survey should be conducted to estimate the current population size (the previous survey had been conducted in 1999). And finally, the hunt is now highly controlled under a quota and not posing a risk to the population.

In 2004-05, DFO also consulted with the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board (QWB) and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) on possible listing of the Cumberland Sound beluga population. QWB was not in favour of listing because they believe that Inuit do not over-harvest, population estimates are unreliable and should not be used as a basis for assessing the status of an animal population, and if this beluga population was listed and harvest restrictions imposed it would pose economic hardship on Inuit who rely on country food.

At that time, NTI supported the decision made by COSEWIC to change the designation of the Cumberland Sound beluga population from Endangered to the less at-risk category of Threatened because both the 1999 survey (population estimate: 1547) and local Inuit knowledge suggest the population is increasing. NTI also noted that the community of Pangnirtung has worked cooperatively with DFO over several years, to develop a beluga recovery strategy and management plan, and that work should be recognized as a positive relationship.

An individual residing in Nunavut, but not Pangnirtung, also submitted comments in 2004-05. That respondent supported listing because historical data shows that the population has been reduced. Listing would require the production of a recovery strategy and might increase recovery activities and awareness at the community level. Listing might also result in more research.

One non-Nunavut organization also submitted comments. The Canadian Wildlife Federation supported listing because they believe Canada should protect its migrating species and that listing would contribute to protection through public awareness and education. They also stated that COSEWIC is a recognizable and credible scientific body that uses the latest scientific information, therefore their recommendations should be accepted by the federal government.

2008

In June 2008, DFO sent a second round of consultation letters to the Pangnirtung HTO, QWB, NTI and the Nunavut Inuit Wildlife Secretariat (NIWS). The letters explained why there had been a delay in the listing process, described what new information is now available and asked whether they support listing of Cumberland Sound belugas.

The Pangnirtung HTO said they do not support listing because they believe that belugas are now plentiful in Cumberland Sound and their annual harvest exceeds the quota only slightly, (due either to direct harvest and/or incidental take in nets set for seals or narwhals). They feel the commercial beluga hunt conducted by the Hudson's Bay Company in Cumberland Sound in the 1940s-1960s should be forgotten, and the recent increase in beluga numbers observed by local hunters considered sufficient evidence that the population is now neither threatened nor in need of listing under SARA. The HTO expressed concern that listing would curtail or stop their current subsistence hunt. Twenty-two local hunters signed a petition indicating their opposition to listing the Cumberland Sound beluga population.

The QWB also does not support listing for several reasons: the current harvest of 41 is sustainable; local hunters report seeing more belugas since beluga management measures were undertaken in the 1980s; recent surveys indicate beluga numbers have increased since the early 1990s; and, DFO should be pro-active in managing threats to belugas in Cumberland Sound by enforcing the Fisheries Act and other relevant legislation instead of listing the population under SARA.

No other responses were received.

EASTERN HIGH ARCTIC-BAFFIN BAY BELUGA

2005

DFO representatives met with the HTO Boards and/or communities of Grise Fiord, Resolute Bay and Taloyoak in January 2005 to ask whether they supported the Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay beluga population being listed as Special Concern under the *Species at Risk Act*. DFO gave a presentation explaining the Species at Risk process and what would happen if the beluga population was listed.

Participants asked about current scientific knowledge of the population and the Greenland harvest. DFO provided the latest information available on population numbers, distribution, identification, harvest statistics and threats. DFO also reported that Canada and Greenland work together to manage this shared beluga population through the Canada/Greenland Joint Commission on the Conservation and Management of Narwhal and Beluga. In 2004, the Greenland government instituted a beluga quota to help control the harvest off West Greenland.

Numerous participants expressed concern that listing would affect their way of life by limiting or denying them access to beluga meat and *maqtaq*. DFO explained that listing would require the development of a management plan but not result in automatic prohibitions against hunting.

During the public meeting held in Grise Fiord, and in one consultation workbook received from that community, participants said they were not in favour of listing this beluga population under the *Species at Risk Act* as Special Concern. Participants

agreed with COSEWIC's assessment that the population is not jeopardized by the Canadian hunt. However, they disagreed that listing the population would protect it from the excessive hunt occurring in the waters off West Greenland because a management plan developed in Canada would not apply to Greenland. Grise Fiord hunters felt that Canada and Greenland could do more to manage the Greenland hunt.

During the HTO Board meeting and public meeting held in Resolute Bay, and in a few consultation workbooks received from that community, most participants said they were not in favour of adding the Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay beluga population to the SARA List for several reasons. The hunters of Resolute Bay report seeing many belugas in the region. *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* suggests there are two distinct populations – one consisting of Canadian whales and the other of Greenland whales – and DFO has no current population estimates for either. Many participants noted a management plan developed in Canada would not apply to Greenland. They also felt the Greenland government should explain how they are managing their over-harvest before the community makes a decision on whether to list.

During the HTO Board meeting and public meeting held in Taloyoak, participants said they were not in favour of adding the Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay beluga population to the SARA List. They gave the following reasons: the primary threat is from Greenland hunters, a Canadian management plan would not apply to Greenland, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* should have been used in COSEWIC's assessment and surveys should have been conducted over a broader area.

DFO sent consultation letters and workbooks to the HTOs and Elders Groups in Arctic Bay and Pond Inlet. They did not respond.

In 2005, DFO also consulted with the QWB and NTI on possible listing of the Eastern High Arctic-Baffin Bay beluga population. QWB was not in favour of listing because they believe that Inuit do not over-harvest, population estimates are unreliable and should not be used as a basis for assessing the status of an animal population, and if this beluga population were listed and harvest restrictions imposed it would pose economic hardship on Inuit who rely on country food. NTI also did not support listing because the population is healthy (population est. ~ 21,213) and approximately 85% overwinter in northern Baffin Bay, separate from the Greenland population. In addition, current harvest levels in Canadian waters are below the maximum sustainable yield (MSY=317).

An individual residing in Nunavut, but not in the High Arctic, also submitted comments in 2005. That respondent did not support listing because there is not enough proof that beluga numbers have been reduced.

One non-Nunavut organization also submitted comments. The Canadian Wildlife Federation supported listing because they believe Canada should protect its migrating species and that listing would contribute to protection through public awareness and education. They also stated that COSEWIC is a recognizable and

credible scientific body that uses the latest scientific information, therefore their recommendations should be accepted by the federal government.

2008

In mid-June 2008, DFO sent a second round of consultation letters to the HTOs in Grise Fiord, Resolute Bay, Taloyoak, Arctic Bay and Pond Inlet, as well as the QWB, NTI and the NIWS.

The Resolute HTO said they do not support listing because they believe this population is not in danger. They report seeing many whales around Cornwallis Island and only hunt what they need for subsistence.

The HTO in Taloyoak also do not support listing this population.

No other responses were received.

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