

# **SUBMISSION TO THE NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD JUNE 2022**

## **FOR**

**Information: X**

**Decision:**

**Issue:** Information regarding plans for consultation and decision-making regarding the possible addition of the Beluga Whale, Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population, to the List of Wildlife Species at Risk on the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA).

### **Background:**

As per 3.5 of the Harmonized Listing Process, the Department of Fisheries & Oceans (DFO) is informing the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessment results and a DFO intent to consult on the Beluga Whale, Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population.

### **The Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population of Beluga Whale**

The Beluga Whale, Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population, was seriously overexploited in West Greenland and declined considerably – possibly by as much as 50% – over the period 1981-1994. It was assessed as Special Concern by COSEWIC in 2004. Since that time, there has been less hunting pressure in Greenland, and harvests are now likely sustainable and the population appears to have stabilized and may be growing. However, there is concern that increased vessel traffic facilitated by climate change is changing the nature of the acoustic habitat of this population. COSEWIC has determined that the population may fit, or is close to fitting, the criteria for Threatened.

In August 2010, following consultations and discussions with the NWMB, a decision was made to not list the Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population of Beluga Whale. The recommendation not to list was made to the Governor in Council in March 2013. During consultations, it was stated that overharvesting in Greenland needed to be addressed further and that the stock was showing signs of recovering, so there was little point in listing the population in Canada. While there have been improvements in lowering the Greenland harvest, in November 2020, this population was again assessed as Special Concern by COSEWIC. There is currently some uncertainty over the population size which was estimated at 21,213 in 1996.

### **Distribution**

The Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population occupies a distinct geographic region in the summer that is separate from other beluga. Beluga from this population summer exclusively in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, primarily near Somerset Island, and along the northeastern coast of Baffin Island. Wintering animals are found in two main areas: along the west Greenland coast and the North Water

Polynya spanning Canada and Greenland. Figure 1 shows the known summering and wintering areas of the Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population as well as the migration routes between these areas. Information on the distribution and movements of the belugas in the Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population comes from aerial surveys, satellite-tagging, and Traditional Knowledge.

### **Requirements for Consultation and Approval**

Article 5.2.34 (f) of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement states that the NWMB shall, at its discretion, approve the designation of rare, threatened or endangered species. As well, Section 27 (2) (c) of the SARA requires that before making a recommendation as to whether or not to add a species at risk to Schedule 1, the Minister must consult the Board for species found in an area in respect of which the Board is authorized by a land claims agreement to perform its functions.

### **Consultation and Approval**

DFO is planning to consult with Hunters and Trappers Organizations in Nunavut adjacent to the distribution of the Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population of Beluga Whale to ensure that any listing decision is made in full consideration of their views. Comments received will be used by the Minister to decide whether to recommend legal listing of the Beluga Whale, Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population. A consultation summary will be provided to the NWMB when consultations are complete.

### **Approval**

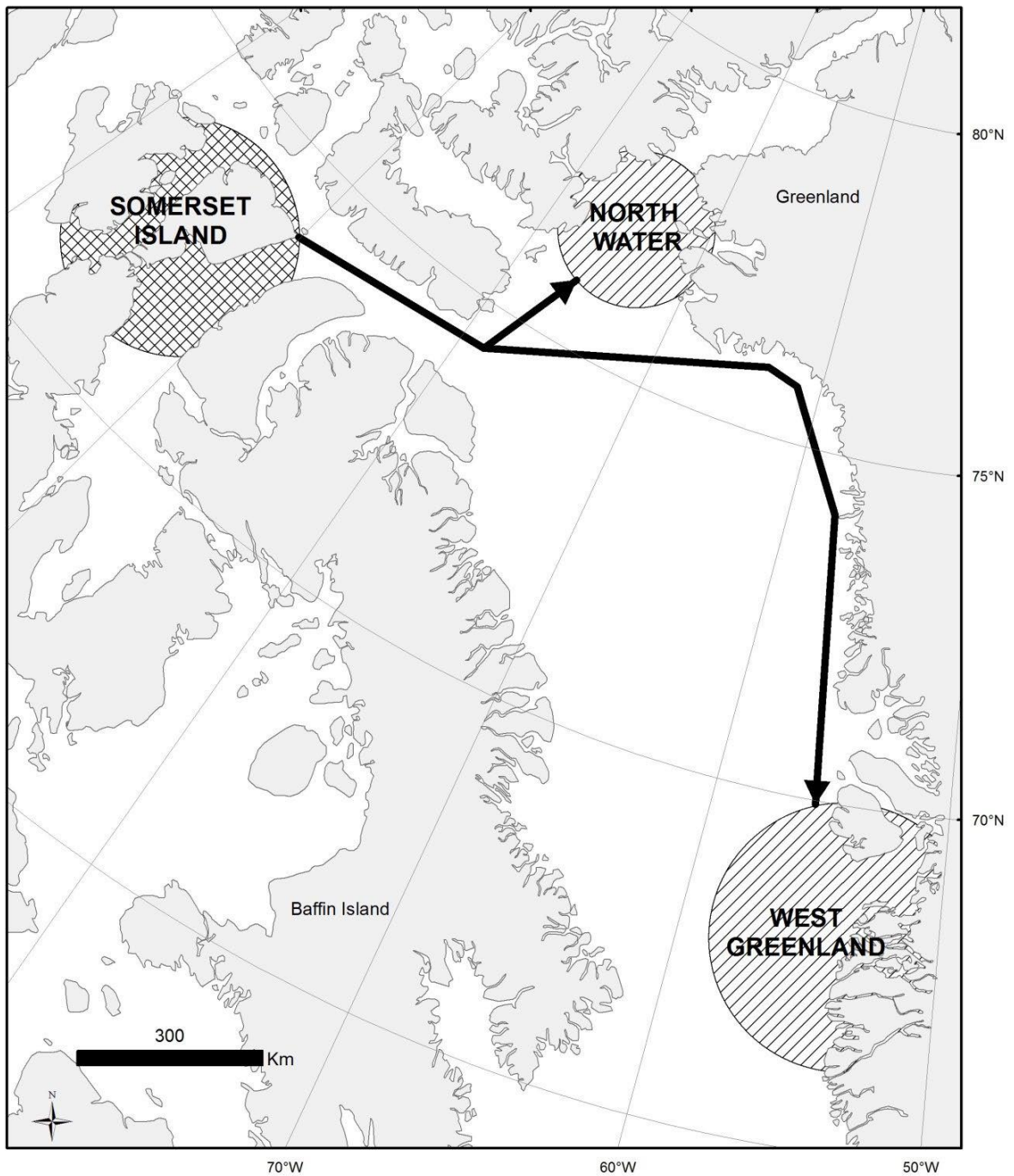
After public consultations have been completed, DFO will provide the Board with a summary of the community consultations for the Beluga Whale, Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay population. At a later date we will inform the Board what the Minister plans to recommend to the Governor-in-Council with regards to listing. At that time, the Board will be asked whether or not it wishes to express an opinion on listing.

### **Prepared by:**

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### **Date:**

March 29, 2022



**Figure 1.** General distribution of Eastern High Arctic – Baffin Bay Belugas showing approximate summering grounds (double-hatched area) around Somerset Island in Canada, the two main wintering grounds (hatched areas) in the North Water and along the West Greenland coast, and the migratory route used in the spring and autumn. Reprinted from Ferguson and Hansen (2018).