

Beluga Whale - (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – Taxonomic name means ‘white dolphin without a fin’ as their adult skin color is white

Physical Description: A middle sized whale, beluga average 14 m (13 ft) in length, but can grow to 5 m (16 ft.), and weigh up to 1500 kg (3,350 lbs).

Food Web - Prey: Beluga eat a wide range of mainly bottom-dwelling foods like invertebrates, including crab, shrimp, clams and cephalopods (squid, octopus), as well as fish (cod, flounder, herring).

Food Web - Predator: Hunted by killer whale and shark, and Arctic subsistence hunters who eat the meat, and blubber and outer skin as maktaaq (or mattak), an excellent source of nutrition. The leather like skin is used for clothing.

SEA ICE & CLIMATE

Sea Ice: Beluga are ice associated, found in areas seasonally covered by sea ice, swimming among icebergs and sections of ice. The lack of dorsal fin allows it to move under the ice, popping up in leads (cracks) to breathe. Some groups will move as the ice forms annually and return to feed as it breaks apart. Belugas depend on sea ice for both food and protection. These slow moving whale hide among the ice floes, for protection from the predatory killer whales that have been expanding their range as sea ice has retreated.

Climate Impacts: The loss of sea ice is a habitat threat to the beluga whale. As the killer whale expands its range the beluga is threatened by this highly predatory species.

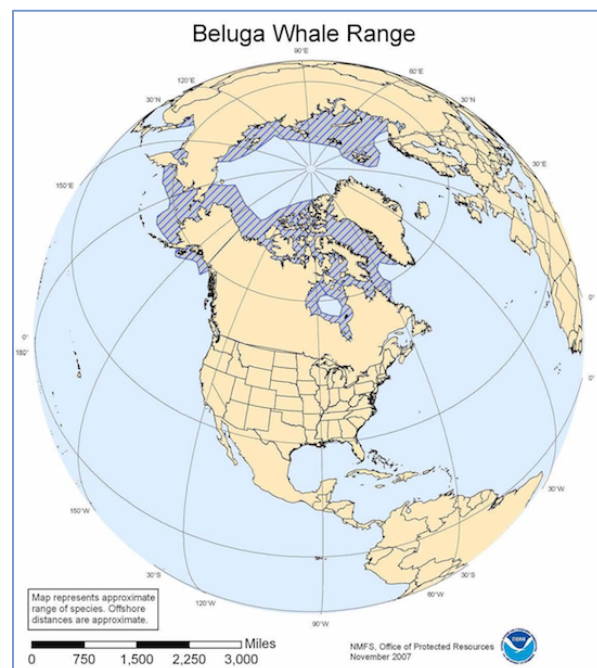
ADAPTIVE FEATURES

Adaptive features: **White color** is an adaptation for the Arctic environment making them less visible when moving through the sea ice. Their **cervical vertebrae** is not fused, allowing for a full range of motion for the head and neck for easy movement and feeding in mud and ice-covered areas. **Insulated** by a thick layer of blubber, up to 40% of their body mass, they stay warm in their Arctic environment. Their **lack of a dorsal fin** allows them to swim easily under the ice; instead they have a tough nerveless **dorsal ridge** to assist when breaking through sea ice.

LIFECYCLE

Lifecycle: Beluga live anywhere from 35-50 yrs. Gestation for a beluga is 14 months and the calves stay with their mothers for two years after birth. This means that when populations are impacted there is a long recovery time.

DISTRIBUTION



Distribution Map: Range shown as hatched areas in this NOAA map. Range includes both Arctic and sub-Arctic areas - Canada into Hudson Bay, around Alaska and Russia, Greenland and Svalbard.

Conservation Status: Internationally 'Near Threatened' but Cook Inlet Alaskan Population 'Critically Endangered'