

BLUE WHALE THREATS AND STATUS

THREATS

Whilst whaling has been the greatest threat to blue whale populations over the past 150 years, today's whales face threats also from ship strikes, the fishing industry, underwater noise, gas and oil exploration activities and from the contamination and environmental degradation of their habitat.

Ship Strikes

Today, a primary threat to blue whales is ship strikes. In September 2007, at least three blue whale mortalities were confirmed to be caused by ship strikes in the Santa Barbara Channel off Southern California — an alarming number considering that scientists expect one mortality every few years. In March 1998, a dead 20-metre male blue whale was brought into Rhode Island waters on the bow of a tanker. In the western North Atlantic, at least 9 percent of the whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence near Quebec have injuries or scars attributed to contact with ships. These areas have a relatively high risk of ship strikes due to heavy shipping traffic.

Whaling

Blue whales evaded early whaling efforts thanks to their enormous size. Their prewhaling populations have been estimated at more than 250,000 globally. Then, in the 1860s, a Norwegian whaler, Svend Foyn, invented an exploding harpoon gun and deployed steam-powered factory ships to take down the giant whales. Foyn also perfected the method of inflating blue whales with air once they had been killed so they wouldn't sink after death. With these techniques in place, the whaling industry went after blue whales. A single blue whale could yield up to 120 barrels of precious oil. The slaughter peaked in the 1930 – 1931 season, when nearly 30,000 whales were killed. Eventually, up to 90 percent of blue whales had been killed, and the whaling industry had to turn to other species to provide the oil and meat it sought.

In the 1960s, the International Whaling Commission banned all hunting of blue whales, including aboriginal or "subsistence" whaling, giving them worldwide protection. This moratorium, however, does not apply to Iceland, Norway or the Russian Federation, which have objected to this provision. Within the United States, the blue whale is listed as "endangered" throughout its range under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and is listed as "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. While blue whale populations appear to be on the rebound, the blue whale, like most large animals, takes time to reach sexual maturity and tends to produce just one offspring with each yearlong gestation. It is believed that there are now approximately 10,000 to 25,000 blue whales on the planet.

INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION - WHALING: HISTORY AND FUTURE

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/publications/pubs/iwc-factsheet-history.pdf>

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, WATER, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS - WHALING IN AUSTRALIAN WATERS

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/publications/iwc-factsheets.html>

Fishery Interaction

Over the last 10 years, there has been little evidence that blue whales are threatened by fisheries or fishing lines, but the threat still exists. Blue whales have been entangled by fishing lines in the past, and it is not known how many blue whales become ensnared and injured by the lines but then manage to escape.

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT- BROCHURE ON WHALES AND FISHING

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/publications/pubs/fishing-for-facts-brochure.pdf>

Other Potential Non-primary Threats

Noise from ships, competition for prey resources, habitat degradation and vessel disturbance are additional concerns. There is little evidence available to describe or quantify the impacts of these threats to blue whales. For example, while anthropogenic noise, or noise caused by humans, is known to be a threat for other cetaceans, little is known about whether, or how, it affects blue whales. Some research, however, suggests that the noise made by sonar, underwater gas and oil exploration, and commercial shipping has effectively reduced the range of blue whales' calls by about 90 percent.