



FACTSHEET

Walrus - Facing new challenges in a changing Arctic

Walruses (*Odobenus rosmarus*) are the largest seal, or pinniped, species in the Arctic, and are highly adapted to their sea ice environment. They are found in clusters around the Arctic and consist of a single species, made up of at least two subspecies: the atlantic walrus and the larger pacific walrus. Walrus population numbers are difficult to estimate, but it is thought that there are about 20,000 atlantic walrus, and about 129,000 pacific walrus.

Walrus are the only living examples of the **Odobenidae** family and **Odobenus** genus. They are often seen in small groups and can gather in the tens of thousands. Walruses feed mainly on shellfish, such as clams, and therefore normally stay around shallower waters where their food is found.

The walrus has been exploited by people for thousands of years, and is particularly important to Indigenous peoples such as Inuit, Yupik, and Chukchi. Walrus meat still feeds people, the skins are still used for footwear, and the ivory for carving.

During the last five hundred years, commercial hunting of walruses endangered both the animals and the communities who relied on them. By the 1880s, as much as half of the pacific walrus population was gone. This had an immense impact on native communities.

By 1960, governments began enforcing regulations to decrease the number of animals taken and to protect many coastal haul-out sites. The pacific walrus population has recovered from overharvest, but now faces a more complicated and significant threat. The atlantic population suffered greatly from commercial harvesting, which wiped out the most southerly population of the walrus. Commercial hunting of atlantic walrus is now prohibited.



photo: WWF US

Threats to walrus

In addition to over-harvesting, walrus populations are threatened by noise pollution (such as under and over water sounds made by ships, aircraft, seismic activities and offshore drilling), pollution (oil spill and other contaminants), and fisheries (fisheries can compete directly with walruses for a food resource or damage their food supply by disturbing the bottom). There is also a risk with increasing tourism that more walrus haul-out sites will be disturbed if no regulations are in place and enforced. In addition, a new and very serious threat has emerged – that of climate change.

Walruses normally rest on the sea ice between feeding bouts, and females with their young rest on ice floes for long periods, floating above their food. However, the loss of summer sea ice in parts of the walrus range has changed this behavior.

For instance, over the last ten years, summer sea ice has decreased dramatically north of Chukotka and has withdrawn northward from the continental shelves into very deep water.

This has meant that in many areas, the distance between ice floe and ocean bottom is so great that food sources are beyond the diving range of the walrus.

The lack of summer sea ice is causing more and more walrus to haul-out on shore. In 2007, more than 40 000 walrus suddenly come ashore near the Russian settlement of Ryrkaipiy. Local people had never seen so many walrus at once. Suddenly, they had one of the largest walrus colonies in the world next door to the local school. The noise and smell were incredible and many animals died of stampedes when walrus panicked and wanted to reach safety in the water. More than five hundred animals were crushed to death. Many of these carcasses were lying close to the village. In order to prevent an unwanted conflict with coming polar bears that would pass by the village, walrus corpses were removed and stacked in big heaps away from the village. Increasingly, walrus are hauling out onshore in both Russia and Alaska, and there have been many walrus deaths as a result.

When the walrus stayed offshore on the sea ice, they were spread out over a huge area. Now onshore, they gather in large numbers in very tight haul-out sites increasing the risk of trampling deaths. As an added concern, food close to haul-out sites will most likely be depleted due to the sheer number of walrus. Females with calves will have a much longer distance to swim to get to feeding areas and back to shore for a rest.

WWF Response

WWF has been active in making sure that people across the world understand the threats to the walrus as part of our larger efforts to combat climate change. We are also helping on the ground, supporting the activities of scientists and local villagers in Russia to keep watch over the new haul-out sites to try to reduce disturbances that lead to the deadly stampedes.