



FACTSHEET

2013

## Icons at risk

# The western gray whale

Impacts of oil and gas exploration in the main feeding grounds of this species seriously threatens its survival



LESS THAN  
**130**  
WESTERN GREY  
WHALES REMAIN IN  
THE WORLD,  
WITH ONLY 25  
BREEDING FEMALES



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## Species at a glance

**Physical characteristics:** Mottled dark to light gray in color. 15 metres long and 16 tonnes heavy body. No dorsal fin, only a small hump followed by a series of 'knuckles'.

**Habitat and Range:** Waters of the North Pacific Ocean. Summers in the Okhotsk Sea, off the north east coast of the Sakhalin Islands in Russia.

**Life cycle:** The average life span is estimated between 70 – 80 years. Females give birth to a single calf after a gestation period of 13 months.

**Population:** The eastern gray whale population is estimated at around 20,000 to 22,000 individuals. The western gray whale population is *critically endangered* with less than 130 remaining individuals and only 25 breeding females.

**Behaviour:** Solitary creatures, with mother and calf pairs seen during their long migration.

**Diet:** Invertebrates found in the sea floor such as crustaceans, molluscs and worms.

**12000+ MILES**  
IN ONE ROUND TRIP  
MIGRATION BETWEEN  
SUMMER AND WINTER  
FEEDING GROUNDS  
EVERY YEAR

## An iconic species

The gray whale is the only living species of its genus and family *Eschrichtiidae*, which makes it genetically and evolutionarily distinct from any other species of whales found in the ocean. It is also unique in its migratory patterns as no other mammal, on land or sea, covers as much distance along its migratory route as the gray whale. It is also the only whale that feeds by straining the sediment on the sea floor, taking large amounts of sediment into its mouth and letting it pass through the *baleen* so only the bottom dwelling worms, crustaceans and molluscs remain.

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**THE PILTUN  
ASTOKHKOYE OIL  
FIELDS LYING JUST 16  
KMS OFF SAKHALIN  
ISLANDS ARE  
DESTROYING THE ONLY  
FEEDING GROUNDS  
OF THE WESTERN  
GRAY WHALE**

## Threats

The gray whale was considered extinct until 1974, when a small population was found close to California. Thus began massive conservation efforts to revive the population, banning commercial whaling activities and implementing stringent laws. Slowly, the eastern population stabilized, but the western gray whale still faces a dark future.

The shallow waters close to the Sakhalin Island in Russia are the only habitat of this whale which support its unique feeding technique, and allows mothers to teach their calves how to feed in this way. It arrives on these islands in June and spends 6 months consuming up to 2,400 pounds of food per day to fatten itself up for the winter. Despite all conservation efforts, their population has not increased in many years due to the disturbance caused by the oil field, which in turn affects the species ability to feed, communicate, navigate and reproduce.

## Impact of oil drilling

Oil exploration, including geophysical seismic testing, pipe laying, dredging and drilling operations are extremely noisy activities. Since whales rely on sound as their primary sense, such high level of noise pollution causes stress that interferes with important biological behavior. It can lead to hearing damage and in some cases complete abandoning of the feeding grounds. In recent years, scientists have observed the number of whales coming to feed in this area decrease, while the numbers feeding in deep waters are increasing.

This is resulting in under nourished calves, as they can no longer learn to feed properly from the mother. Reports also indicate that whales coming to feed in Sakhalin islands appear weaker due to disturbed feeding habits, leading to reduced reproduction. Oil extraction also increases shipping traffic, and in turn risks of collision with vessels as well as exposure to oil spills.

## Saving the last 130

WWF is committed to saving the last remaining 130 western gray whales by:

1. Documenting and protecting critical feeding and breeding areas and migration routes of the whales.
2. Establish whale sanctuaries, help shift shipping lanes and curtail seismic surveys that disrupt feeding grounds.
3. Increasing awareness of the need for whale conservation at the national, regional and international levels.
4. Involving local communities in economic opportunities from whale conservation initiatives.

## What you can do

WWF is calling on governments and companies to stop the expansion of drilling activities in the habitat of the western gray whale. We need your support in making our voice heard and build a people's movement to save this population. Pledge your support to the Seize Your Power campaign to let the government know, you do not want dirty energy at the cost of losing this precious and unique western gray whale.



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**Why we are here.**  
To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and  
to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.  
[www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org)

**SEIZE YOUR  
POWER** 

Seize Your Power is WWF's global campaign that calls on governments and financial institutions worldwide to act immediately to invest money in renewable energy projects and phase out investments in fossil fuels.

Sign the pledge: [www.panda.org/syp](http://www.panda.org/syp)