



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

Description

Belugas are an unmistakable white color and have a bulging melon on their heads. They have a narrow ridge where a dorsal fin would normally be. Their necks are unusually mobile so they can easily turn or nod their heads (because their cervical vertebrae are not fused). Young belugas are gray and lighten with age.

Habitat and Distribution

Belugas have a circumpolar distribution and are abundant in the arctic and subarctic. Nearly 30 stocks have been defined for management reasons based on their summering grounds where they molt.

Sounds

Belugas are highly social and they make a wide variety of sounds including whistles, squeals, trills, squawks, clucks, chirps, and even sounds that resemble bells and rusty hinges.

Feeding

Belugas feed on a wide variety of organisms including fish, cephalopods, crustaceans, marine worms, and large zooplankton. Many of their prey items dwell on the bottom and belugas use their puckered lips to create suction as they forage at depths greater than 1,000 feet!

Threats

Commercial hunting historically decimated belugas and some stocks are still hunted today. Belugas are also burdened with high contaminant loads and high cancer rates. Natural causes of mortality include killer whales and polar bears.

Fun Fact

Belugas were known by early whalers as “sea canaries” because they are so vocal and produce such a wide variety of musical sounds.



Cara Hotchkin



Cara Hotchkin

Family: Monodontidae
Population: >100,000
Status: Near Threatened
Length: 13 – 16 feet
Weight: 1,500 – 3,500 lbs