

## Current Status of the great whales

Species	Status and threats	Distribution and population estimates	Total
<b>North Atlantic right whale</b> <i>Eubalaena glacialis</i>	<b>Endangered.</b> Hunting of all right whales banned from 1937, when the population was down to under 100. Now the most endangered of the large whales, with no evidence of any increase during the past 15 years. Most serious threats: vessel collisions and entanglement in fishing nets.	<b>Western North Atlantic:</b> probably 300 to 350 <b>Eastern North Atlantic:</b> near extinction	300-350 (Western N. Atlantic pre-whaling population estimated at 1,100 -1,200)
<b>North Pacific right whale</b> <i>Eubalaena japonica</i>	<b>Endangered.</b> Recently agreed to be a separate species, based on genetic analysis. There have been very few sightings in the Eastern North Pacific, with more in the Sea of Okhotsk. Threats: little is known, but likely to be vessel collisions and net entanglement as with North Atlantic right whales.	<b>Eastern North Pacific:</b> extremely rare, very scattered <b>Sea of Okhotsk:</b> Estimated around 900	Under 1000
<b>Southern right whale</b> <i>Eubalaena australis</i>	<b>Lower Risk: conservation dependent.</b> Heavily depleted by commercial whaling, but at least three populations (with nursery areas off Argentina, Australia and South Africa) have been recovering at an encouraging rate. Most serious threat: entanglement in fishing nets.	<b>Southern Hemisphere</b>	About 7,000 (IWC, 1998) (estimate of pre-whaling population: about 70,000)
<b>Bowhead whale</b> <i>Balaena mysticetus</i>	<b>Lower Risk: conservation dependent.</b> The only great whale found exclusively in the Arctic, very long-lived. Heavily hunted by commercial whalers for whalebone and oil during 18th, 19th, and early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as by local people throughout history. Recent research shows that bowheads can live as long as over 200 years, making them the longest lived animals on earth. Divided into five populations, some evidence of recovery. There is hunting by native hunters in Alaska, Russia and Canada (the Alaskan hunt is authorized and monitored by the IWC, and this population is thought to be increasing). Most serious threats: industrial activity including oil and gas exploitation, noise pollution, hunting, climate change and attacks by orcas.	<b>Svalbard: (population Critically Endangered).</b> Initial population about 25,000, now almost extinct, probably below 100 <b>Davis Strait/Baffin Bay (population Endangered):</b> initial population about 12,000, now probably under 400 <b>Hudson Bay/Foxe Basin (population Vulnerable):</b> initial population about 600, now about 350 <b>Okhotsk Sea (population Endangered):</b> initial population about 8,000, now probably below 300 <b>Bering/Chukchi/Beaufort Seas (around Alaska):</b> initial population about 16,000, now between 6,400 and 9,200 (central estimate: 7,500) <i>(Source: IWC 1988)</i>	Probably under 8,500

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<p><b>Blue whale</b> <i>Balaenoptera musculus</i></p>	<p><b>Endangered.</b> Scattered throughout all oceans, but the Northern and Southern Hemisphere populations do not mix since they migrate to tropical waters from their polar summer feeding grounds at different times of the year. Hunting has been banned since 1966. The NE Pacific population may be beginning to recover, but the Antarctic population shows no recovery at all. (There is also a smaller sub-species, the pygmy blue whale, <i>B. m. breviceauda</i>, found mostly in the Indian Ocean). Most serious threats: Marine pollution, and depletion of food source (krill) due to climate change and potential over-fishing.</p>	<p><b>North Atlantic</b> (original population estimated at perhaps 12,000): now perhaps 1,000 to 2,000  <b>North Pacific</b> (original population estimated at perhaps 14,000): now probably in the range 2,000 to 4,000  <b>Antarctic (population Endangered)</b> (original population around 250,000): now about 900 (minimum 400 - maximum 1,400) (Source: IWC 1980-2000)</p>	<p>Probably under 5,000 (Note: this excludes pygmy blue whales)</p>
<p><b>Fin whale</b> <i>Balaenoptera physalus</i></p>	<p><b>Endangered.</b> Most hunting was stopped in 1977, but Iceland continued in the North Atlantic until 1989, and some aboriginal/subsistence whaling by Greenland still continues. There is no evidence of recovery so far. Threats: marine pollution and ship strikes.</p>	<p><b>North Atlantic</b> (no pre-exploitation estimates): Uncertain: between 27,700 and 82,000 (Source: IWC 1969-89.)  <b>Mediterranean:</b> between 3,000 and 7,400.  <b>Southern Hemisphere</b> (pre-exploitation population estimate is 300,000 to 650,000): 12,000</p>	<p>Perhaps about 50,000 to 90,000 worldwide</p>
<p><b>Sei whale</b> <i>Balaenoptera borealis</i></p>	<p><b>Endangered.</b> Hunting continued until 1978. It is especially difficult to estimate their numbers because they are easily confused with Bryde's whales which have an overlapping, but more subtropical, distribution. Threat: marine pollution.</p>	<p><b>Central North Atlantic:</b> 6,100 - 17,700 (Source: IWC 1989).  <b>Rest of North Atlantic:</b> there are no reliable estimates, although seises are thought to be very depleted with few recent sightings. The total is probably under 3,000.  <b>North Pacific:</b> the latest estimate is 13,000, but this dates from 1974 and is not reliable.  <b>Southern Hemisphere:</b> very uncertain estimate: 17,000</p>	<p>Very roughly 50,000 worldwide</p>

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<p><b>Bryde's whale</b> <i>Balaenoptera brydei</i></p> <p>And</p> <p><b>Pygmy Bryde's whale (or Eden's whale)</b> <i>Balaenoptera edeni</i></p>	<p><b>Data deficient:</b> probably two separate species (the larger being off-shore and the smaller in-shore) Only found in tropical and subtropical seas and do not make such long migrations as the other baleen whales. Main threats: depletion of food fish, and illegal hunting (until recently Bryde's were known to be caught illegally in several areas including the Philippines).</p>	<p>They have been reduced in some areas, especially off Peru, Chile, southern Africa, and Japan. Population estimates are very uncertain, partly because they are easily confused with sei whales. The degree of depletion is unknown, because of undocumented "pirate whaling" in the Atlantic under flags of convenience in the 1960s-1970s.</p>	<p>Very roughly 40,000 to 80,000</p>
<p><b>Gray whale</b> <i>Eschrichtius robustus</i></p>	<p><b>Lower Risk: conservation dependent.</b> Of the original three populations, one is extinct in the North Atlantic, one is critically endangered in the western North Pacific, and one has recovered from very low levels in the eastern North Pacific. Main threats: as shallow water feeders, gray whales stay close to coasts and are vulnerable to human disturbance and entanglement in fishing nets. In particular, the critically endangered western population is threatened by intensive oil and gas development in their feeding grounds.</p>	<p><b>Atlantic:</b> extinct <b>Western North Pacific (population Critically Endangered):</b> perhaps 100 to 200 <b>Eastern North Pacific:</b> between 21,900 and 32,400 (Source: IWC 1997/98)</p>	<p>Around 27,000</p>
<p><b>Humpback whale</b> <i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i></p>	<p><b>Vulnerable:</b> Seriously depleted by commercial whaling. Hunting was banned by the IWC in 1963, but Soviet hunting continued illegally mostly in the southern hemisphere until early 1970s. Some populations in the North Pacific and North Atlantic are starting to recover. St. Vincent and the Grenadines has an "aboriginal/subsistence" quota of two humpbacks a year, and is usually reported taking a cow and calf. Several humpback populations are being intensively studied and some 10,000 individuals throughout the world have been identified using photographs. As the most acrobatic of all the great whales and with fascinating songs, humpbacks are very popular for whale-watching. Main threats: they feed and breed near coasts, and so are vulnerable to human disturbance, entanglement in fishing nets and marine pollution</p>	<p><b>Western North Atlantic:</b> about 10,400 (in range 8000 to 13,600) <b>Eastern North Atlantic:</b> original population around 5000, now very low, possibly a few hundred or less. <b>North Pacific:</b> original population roughly estimated at 15,000. Estimates for present numbers range from 6000 to 8000. <b>Northern Indian Ocean:</b> perhaps around 500 <b>Southern Hemisphere south of 60° in summer:</b> around 10,000 (Source: IWC 1988) (a small fraction of the original population)</p>	<p>There were roughly 150,000 before commercial whaling, and perhaps around 28,000 now</p>

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<p><b>Northern (or Common) Minke whale</b> <i>Balaenoptera Acutorostrata</i></p>	<p><b>Lower risk: near threatened.</b></p> <p>Occurs in the North Atlantic and North Pacific. Migrates northwards in summer, but the winter breeding grounds are largely unknown. There is also a subspecies, Dwarf Minke whale, occurring in the southern hemisphere.</p> <p>They have been badly depleted in some parts of their range such as much of the North Atlantic and the western North Pacific. Main threats: Uncontrolled whaling, by-catch in fishing nets, marine pollution.</p>	<p><b>NE Atlantic:</b> considerable controversy has surrounded this population estimate. Norway is catching around 600 whales a year under their objection to the moratorium, while in 1985 the IWC agreed the population was depleted to below 54% of its original level and should be protected. In 1996 two estimates of 67,000 and 118,000 were calculated.</p> <p><b>Central Atlantic:</b> in the range 21,600 to 31,400 (<i>Source: IWC 1987-89</i>)</p> <p><b>West Greenland:</b> in the range 1,790 to 5,950 (<i>Source: IWC 1987-89</i>)</p> <p><b>Canadian East coast:</b> no estimate available</p> <p><b>Western North Pacific:</b> Population boundaries are very uncertain, but the IWC currently recognises two stocks:</p> <p><b>Okhotsk Sea - West Pacific:</b> Japan catches 100 minke a year from this stock as part of its scientific whaling. Estimated at around 25,000 (in the range of 12,800 to 48,600) (<i>Source: IWC 1989-90</i>), and</p> <p><b>Sea of Japan/Yellow Sea/East China Sea (known as the "J" stock):</b> this is a distinct population that the IWC agreed in 1988 was seriously depleted. South Korea reports high levels of minke by-catch (in some years over 100). The 1997 estimate was under 900 (<i>Source IWC 1997</i>)</p>	<p>In the range 103,000 to 204,000</p>
<p><b>Southern (or Antarctic) minke whale</b> <i>Balaenoptera bonaerensis</i></p>	<p><b>Lower risk: conservation dependent</b></p> <p>Found in all oceans south of the equator, summering in the Southern Ocean.</p> <p>Note: the southern population of minke whales has only been agreed to be a distinct species since 1998.</p> <p>Threats: Uncontrolled whaling, depletion of krill due to climate change and over-fishing.</p>	<p><b>S. Hemisphere:</b> previously the total was estimated at around 760,000 (<i>Source: IWC 1982-89</i>), but in 2000 the IWC Scientific Committee agreed this was no longer an appropriate estimate, and that the total could be appreciably lower. Japan catches up to 440 minke a year under its scientific whaling programme.</p>	<p>No current estimate</p>

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<b>Sperm whale</b> <i>Physeter Macrocephalus</i>	<b>Vulnerable:</b> The only toothed great whale. Hunting has been banned since 1981. There is even more uncertainty over the remaining numbers of sperm whales than there is over the other great whales. This is because their diving behaviour (they often remain underwater for long periods) makes it difficult to estimate group size, which makes information from surveys impossible to analyse in the same way as for the other whales. Research has now begun into acoustic survey techniques, but much more remains to be done. The whalers may have mostly targeted the larger males, so that the balance between the sexes has been distorted. Main threats: marine pollution.	<b>Found in all oceans:</b> highly migratory. More remain in the Northern Hemisphere than in the Southern Hemisphere	<b>Unknown,</b> there may have been perhaps 2 or 3 million worldwide before exploitation, and possibly up to 1 or 2 million remain now, but the totals could be very much lower

**WARNING: ALMOST ALL FIGURES ARE VERY APPROXIMATE**

**Status categories:** From 2000 *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (2000)*

**Definitions of status categories:**

*Critically Endangered:* facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future.

*Endangered:* facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future.

*Vulnerable:* facing a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future.

*Lower Risk: conservation dependent:* subject to a conservation programme, cessation of which would result in qualifying for a threatened category within five years.

*Lower risk: near threatened:* not conservation dependent, but close to Vulnerable.

*Data deficient:* inadequate data to assess risk of extinction - may be threatened.

**Sources:** The population estimates are based on assessments by members of the IWC Scientific Committee and of the IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group.

**In addition, the following are useful sources of information:**

- \* IUCN Red Data Book: *Dolphins, Porpoises and Whales of the World (1991)*
- \* IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group, *Dolphins, Porpoises and Whales: 1994-1998 Action Plan for the Conservation of Cetaceans (1994)*
- \* UNEP/FAO: *Marine Mammals of the World* (FAO Species Identification Guide, 1993)
- \* International Whaling Commission (IWC) website: [www.iwcoffice.org](http://www.iwcoffice.org)