

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



Pacific Walrus

Odobenus rosmarus divergens

Region:

Arctic

Area affected:

Bering, Chukchi Seas

Climatic change:

Melting sea ice

Impact:

Habitat loss

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Like their relatives the seals and sea lions, walrus are marine mammals adapted for swimming and diving. With two sets of flippers and weighing in at 4,000 pounds for males and 2,500 for females, they are ungainly on land. They feed in the relatively shallow waters of the continental shelf, where enough sunlight reaches the ocean floor to support a rich bounty of invertebrates. Dragging their tusks along the ocean bottom and rooting through the sediments with the sensitive bristles of their “mustaches,” walrus find clams, mussels and marine worms to eat. Between foraging dives, they haul out and rest on sea ice. Females also give birth on the ice, and leave their calves there, safe from predation by orcas and polar bears, returning regularly to feed them between dives.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

To rest and regularly feed their young, walrus need stable and predictable sea ice near the shallow waters where they forage. The accelerating loss of Arctic sea ice means the ice edge is retreating faster in the spring, moving northward and away from shallow, nearshore feeding areas and out over waters too deep for walrus to reach the ocean bottom. Summer sea ice is retreating by 13 percent each decade and it is predicted that by 2040, Arctic summers will be completely sea ice-free. This leaves pacific walrus with two options: undertake a marathon swim to reach their calves on the more-distant ice, which can be a 250-mile trip, or congregate on the coast. This mass congregation, or “haulout,” has been witnessed on coasts across the Arctic with increasing frequency. In 2014, an astonishing 35,000 walrus were spotted on a single island. When amassed in such large numbers, easily spooked walrus are likely to stampede if disturbed and risk trampling one another in the rush to escape to the water. **In 2007—a record year for Arctic sea ice loss at the time—3,000 walrus, mostly calves, were crushed to death in stampedes along the coast of Russia.**

References

Suliman, A. 2021. Where’s walrus? Scientists seek public ‘detectives’ to spot giant animals from space. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/10/14/walrus-count-space-climate-change/>

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