BOWHEAD WHALE (*Balaena mysticetus*): Western Arctic Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Western Arctic bowhead whales are distributed in seasonally ice-covered waters of the Arctic and near-Arctic, generally north of 60°N and south of 75°N in the western Arctic Basin (Braham 1984, Moore and Reeves 1993). For management purposes, four stocks of bowhead whales have been recognized worldwide by the International Whaling Commission (IWC 2010). Small stocks, comprising only a few hundred individuals, occur in the Sea of Okhotsk and the offshore waters of Spitsbergen (Zeh et al. 1993, Shelden and Rugh 1995, Wiig et al. 2009, Shpak et al. 2014, Boertmann et al. 2015). Bowhead whales occur in western Greenland (Hudson Bay and Foxe Basin) and eastern Canada (Baffin Bay and Davis Strait), and evidence suggests that these should be considered one stock based on genetics (Postma et al. 2006, Bachmann et al. 2010, Heide-Jørgensen et al. 2010, Wiig et al. 2010), aerial surveys (Cosens et al. 2006), and tagging data (Dueck et al. 2006; Heide-Jørgensen et al. 2006; IWC 2010, 2011). This stock, previously thought to include only a few hundred animals, may number over a thousand (Heide-Jørgensen et al. 2006, Wiig et al. 2011), and perhaps over 6,000 (IWC 2008). The only stock found within U.S. waters is the Western Arctic stock (Figs. 1 and 2), also known as the Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort stock (Rugh et al. 2003) or Bering Sea stock (Burns et al. 1993). Although Jorde et al. (2007) suggested there might be multiple stocks of bowhead whales in U.S. waters, several studies (George et al. 2007, Taylor et al. 2007, Rugh et al. 2009) and the IWC Scientific Committee concluded that data are most consistent with one stock that migrates throughout waters of northern and western Alaska (IWC 2008).

The majority of the Western Arctic stock migrates annually from wintering areas (December to March) in the northern Bering Sea, through the Chukchi Sea in the spring (April through May), to the eastern Beaufort Sea (Fig. 1) where they spend much of the summer (June through early to mid-October) before returning again to the Bering Sea (Fig. 2) in the fall (September through December) to overwinter (Braham et al. 1980, Moore and Reeves 1993, Quakenbush et al. 2010a, Citta et al. 2015). Some bowhead whales are found in

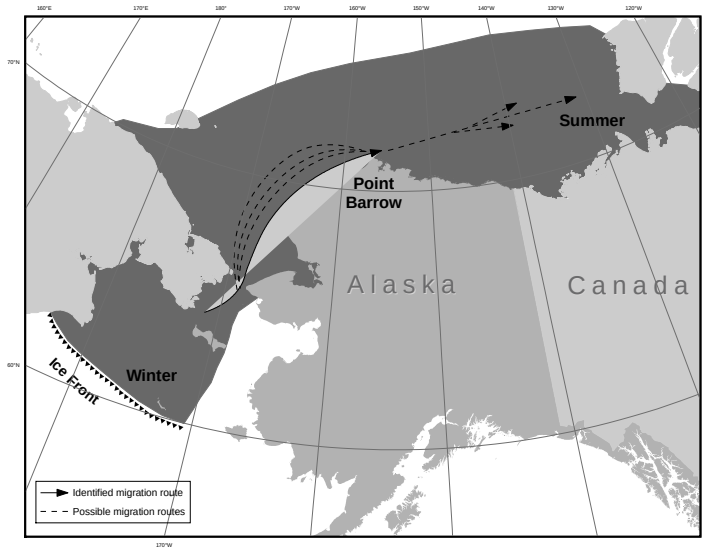

Figure 1. Dark areas depict the approximate distribution of the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales. The spring migration represented here by lines and arrows follows a route from the Bering Sea wintering area to the Beaufort Sea summering area, mostly along a coastal tangent that constricts somewhat as it goes east past Point Barrow.

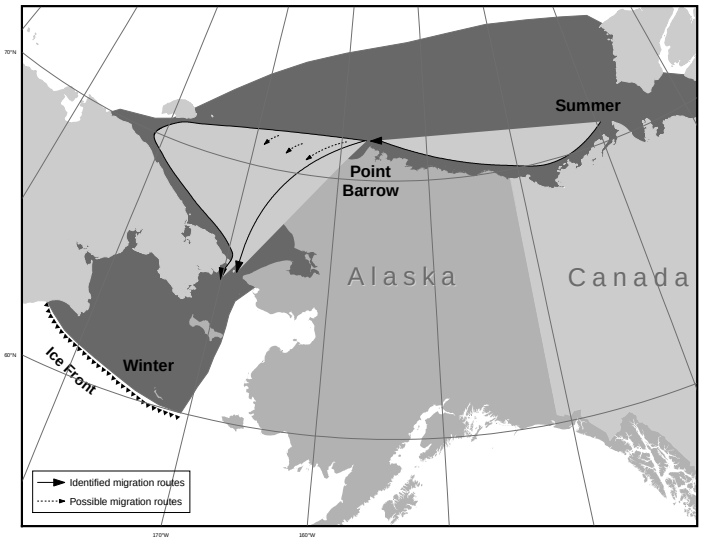

Figure 2. Dark areas depict the approximate distribution of the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales. The fall migration is represented here by lines and arrows showing generalized routes used to travel from the Beaufort Sea (summering area) to the Bering Sea (wintering area).

the western Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering seas in summer, and these are thought to be a part of the expanding Western Arctic stock (Rugh et al. 2003; Clarke et al. 2013, 2014, 2015; Citta et al. 2015).

During winter and spring, bowhead whales are closely associated with sea ice (Moore and Reeves 1993, Quakenbush et al. 2010a, Citta et al. 2015). The bowhead whale spring migration follows fractures in the sea ice around the coast of Alaska, generally in the shear zone between the shorefast ice and the mobile pack ice. During summer, most of the population is in relatively ice-free waters in the southeastern Beaufort Sea (Citta et al. 2015), an area often exposed to industrial activity related to petroleum exploration (e.g., Richardson et al. 1987, Davies 1997). Summer aerial surveys conducted in the western Beaufort Sea during July and August of 2012-2014 have had relatively high sighting rates of bowhead whales, including cows with calves and feeding animals (Clarke et al. 2013, 2014, 2015). During the autumn migration through the Beaufort Sea, bowhead whales generally select shelf waters (Citta et al. 2015). In winter in the Bering Sea, bowhead whales often use areas with ~100% sea-ice cover, even when polynyas are available (Quakenbush et al. 2010a, Citta et al. 2015).

Evidence suggests that bowhead whales feed on concentrations of zooplankton throughout their range. Likely or confirmed feeding areas include Amundsen Gulf and the eastern Canadian Beaufort Sea; the central and western U.S. Beaufort Sea; Wrangel Island; and the coast of Chukotka, between Wrangel Island and the Bering Strait (Lowry et al. 2004; Ashjian et al. 2010; Clarke and Ferguson 2010a; Quakenbush et al. 2010a, 2010b; Okkonen et al. 2011; Clarke et al. 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; Citta et al. 2015). Bowhead whales have also been observed feeding during the summer in the northeastern Chukchi Sea (Clarke and Ferguson 2010b).

POPULATION SIZE

All stocks of bowhead whales were severely depleted during intense commercial whaling, starting in the early 16th century near Labrador, Canada (Ross 1993), and spreading to the Bering Sea in the mid-19th century (Braham 1984, Bockstoce and Burns 1993, Bockstoce et al. 2007). Woodby and Botkin (1993) summarized previous efforts to estimate bowhead whale population size prior to the onset of commercial whaling. They reported a minimum worldwide population estimate of 50,000, with 10,400-23,000 in the Western Arctic stock (dropping to less than 3,000 at the end of commercial whaling). Brandon and Wade (2006) used Bayesian model averaging to estimate that the Western Arctic stock consisted of 10,960 bowhead whales (9,190-13,950; 5th and 95th percentiles, respectively) in 1848 at the start of commercial whaling.

Because the IWC requires a population estimate at least every 10 years in order to determine a strike limit for aboriginal subsistence hunting, systematic counts of bowhead whales have been conducted since 1978 (Krogman et al. 1989; Table 1). These include ice-based visual and acoustic counts. These counts have been corrected for whales missed due to distance offshore (since the mid-1980s, using acoustic methods described in Clark et al. 1994), whales missed when no watch was in effect (through interpolations from sampled periods), and whales missed during a watch (estimated as a function of visibility, number of observers, and distance offshore: Zeh et al. 1993, Givens et al. 2016). These estimates of abundance have not been corrected for a small portion of the population that may not migrate past Point Barrow during the period when counts are made.

Table 1. Summary of abundance estimates for the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales. The historical estimates were made by back-projecting using a simple recruitment model. All other estimates were developed by corrected ice-based census counts. Historical estimates are from Woodby and Botkin (1993); 1978-2001 estimates are from George et al. (2004) and Zeh and Punt (2004). The 2011 estimate is reported in Givens et al. (2016).

Year	Abundance estimate (CV)	Year	Abundance estimate (CV)
Historical estimate	10,400-23,000	1985	5,762 (0.253)
End of commercial whaling	1,000-3,000	1986	8,917 (0.215)
1978	4,765 (0.305)	1987	5,298 (0.327)
1980	3,885 (0.343)	1988	6,928 (0.120)
1981	4,467 (0.273)	1993	8,167 (0.017)
1982	7,395 (0.281)	2001	10,545 (0.128)
1983	6,573 (0.345)	2011	16,820 (0.052)

Bowhead whales were identified from aerial photographs taken in 1985 and 1986, and again in 2003 and 2004, and the results were used in a sight-resight analysis (Table 1). These population estimates and their associated error ranges are comparable to the estimates obtained from the combined ice-based visual and acoustic counts (Raftery and Zeh 1998, Schweder et al. 2009, Koski et al. 2010). An aerial photographic survey was conducted near Point Barrow concurrently with the ice-based spring census in 2011; these data are currently being analyzed to produce a revised abundance estimate based on sight-resight data (Mocklin et al. 2012, Vate Brattström et al. 2016).

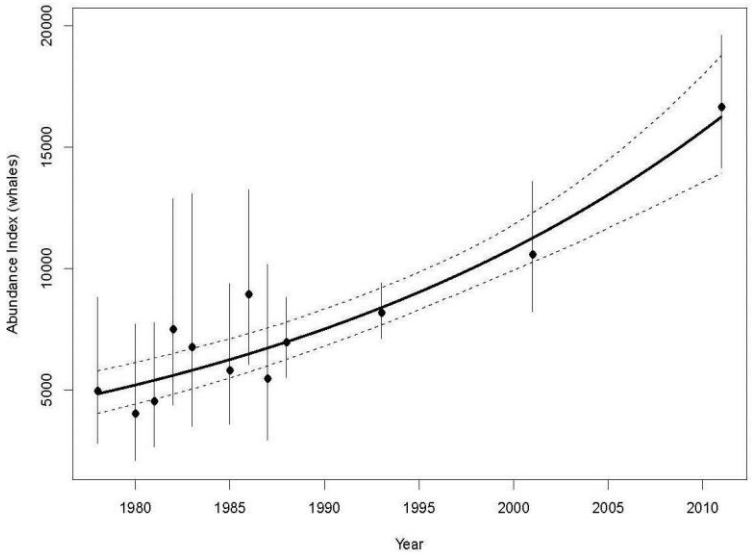

Figure 3. Abundance estimates for the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales, 1978-2011 (Givens et al. 2013), as computed from ice-based counts, acoustic data, and aerial transect data collected during bowhead whale spring migrations past Point Barrow, Alaska.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) for this stock is calculated from Equation 1 from the potential biological removal (PBR) guidelines (Wade and Angliss 1997): $N_{MIN} = N/\exp(0.842\times[\ln(1+[CV(N)]^2)]^{½})$. Using the 2011 population estimate (N) of 16,820 and its associated coefficient of variation CV(N) of 0.052, N_{MIN} for the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales is 16,100 whales.

Current Population Trend

Based on concurrent passive acoustic and ice-based visual surveys, Givens et al. (2013) reported that the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales increased at a rate of 3.7% (95% CI = 2.9-4.6%) from 1978 to 2011, during which time abundance tripled from approximately 5,000 to approximately 16,820 whales (Givens et al. 2016) (Fig. 3). Schweder et al. (2009) estimated the yearly growth rate to be 3.2% (95% CI = 0.5-4.8%) between 1984 and 2003 using a sight-resight analysis of aerial photographs.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

The current estimate for the rate of increase for this stock of bowhead whales (3.2-3.7%) should not be used as an estimate of R_{MAX} because the population is currently being harvested. It is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be used for the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

PBR is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock has been set at 0.5 rather than the default value of 0.1 for endangered species because population levels are increasing in the presence of a known take (see Wade and Angliss 1997, p. 27-28). Thus, PBR = 161 whales (16,100 × 0.02 × 0.5). The calculation of a PBR level for the Western Arctic bowhead whale stock is required by the MMPA even though the subsistence harvest quota is established under the authority of the IWC based on an extensively tested strike limit algorithm (IWC 2003). The quota is based on subsistence need or the ability of the bowhead whale population to sustain a harvest, whichever is smaller. The IWC bowhead whale quota takes precedence over the PBR estimate for the purpose of managing the Alaska Native subsistence harvest from this stock. For 2013-2018, the IWC established a block quota of 306 landed bowhead whales. Because some whales are struck and lost, a strike limit of 67 (plus up to 15 previously unused strikes) is permitted each year. This quota includes an allowance of five animals per year to be taken by Chukotka Natives in Russia. The 2013-2018 quota maintains the *status quo* of the previous 5-year block quota (2008-2012) but was extended for 6 years.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Detailed information for each human-caused mortality, serious injury, and non-serious injury reported for NMFS-managed Alaska marine mammals in 2011-2015 is listed, by marine mammal stock, in Helker et al. (2017); however, only the mortality and serious injury data are included in the Stock Assessment Reports. The total estimated annual level of human-caused mortality and serious injury for Western Arctic bowhead whales in 2011-2015 is 43 whales: 0.2 in U.S. commercial fisheries and 43 in subsistence takes by Natives of Alaska, Russia, and Canada. Potential threats most likely to result in direct human-caused mortality or serious injury of this stock include entanglement in fishing gear and ship strikes due to increased vessel traffic (from increased commercial shipping in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas).

Fisheries Information

Detailed information (including observer programs, observer coverage, and observed incidental takes of marine mammals) for federally-managed and state-managed U.S. commercial fisheries in Alaska waters is presented in Appendices 3-6 of the Alaska Stock Assessment Reports.

Several cases of line or net entanglement have been reported from whales taken in the subsistence hunt (Philo et al. 1993). George et al. (2017) examined records for 904 bowhead whales harvested between 1990 and 2012. Of these, 521 records were examined for at least one of the three types of scars indicating injuries from line entanglement wounds (515 records), attacks by killer whales (378 records), and ship strikes (and/or propeller injuries) (505 records). Their best estimate of the occurrence of entanglement scars was ~12.1% (59/486; an additional 29 records with possible entanglement scars were excluded from the analysis) with the cause most likely from fishing/crab gear in the Bering Sea. Most entanglement injuries occurred on the peduncle and were rare on smaller subadult and juvenile whales (<10 m).

While there are no observer program records of bowhead whale mortality incidental to U.S. commercial fisheries in Alaska, Citta et al. (2014) found that the distribution of satellite-tagged bowhead whales in the Bering Sea spatially, but not temporally, overlapped areas where commercial pot fisheries occurred and noted the potential risk of entanglement in lost gear. Indeed, some bowhead whales have had interactions with crab pot gear and fishing nets. Twelve percent of harvested bowhead whales showed entanglement scars from commercial fishing gear (George et al. 2017). One dead whale was found floating in Kotzebue Sound in early July 2010, entangled in crab pot gear similar to that used by commercial crabbers in the Bering Sea (Suydam et al. 2011), and one entangled bowhead whale was photographed during the 2011 spring aerial photographic survey of bowhead whales near Point Barrow (Mocklin et al. 2012), but it was not considered to be seriously injured. In July 2015, a dead adult female bowhead whale (2015-FD2) drifting near Saint Lawrence Island in the Bering Strait was found entangled in fishing gear (Suydam et al. 2016). The gear included lines, two floats, and an attached color coded/numbered permit tag for the 2012/2013 winter commercial blue king crab fishery located in Saint Matthew Island waters of the northern Bering Sea (Sheffield and Savoonga Whaling Captains Association 2015). The minimum estimated average annual mortality and serious injury rate in U.S. commercial fisheries in 2011-2015 is 0.2 bowhead whales (Table 2; Helker et al. 2017); however, the actual rate is currently unknown. This mortality and serious injury estimate results from an actual count of verified human-caused deaths and serious injuries and should be considered a minimum because not all entangled animals are found, reported, or have the cause of death determined.

Table 2. Summary of mortality and serious injury of Western Arctic bowhead whales, by year and type, reported to the NMFS Alaska Region marine mammal stranding network in 2011-2015 (Helker et al. 2017). Only cases of mortality and serious injury were recorded in this table; animals with non-serious injuries have been excluded.

Cause of injury	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Mean annual mortality
Entangled in Bering Sea/Aleutian Is. commercial blue king crab pot gear	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Total in commercial fisheries						0.2

Alaska Native Subsistence/Harvest Information

Eskimos have been taking bowhead whales for subsistence purposes for at least 2,000 years (Marquette and Bockstoce 1980, Stoker and Krupnik 1993). Subsistence takes have been regulated by a quota system under the authority of the IWC since 1977. Alaska Native subsistence hunters, primarily from 11 Alaska communities, take approximately 0.1-0.5% of the population per annum (Philo et al. 1993, Suydam et al. 2011). Under this quota, the

total number of bowhead whales landed by Alaska Natives between 1974 and 2015 ranged from 8 to 55 whales (Suydam and George 2012; Suydam et al. 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; George and Suydam 2014). The maximum number of strikes per year is set by a quota which is determined by subsistence needs and bowhead whale abundance and trend estimates (Stoker and Krupnik 1993). Suydam and George (2012) summarized Alaska subsistence harvests of bowhead whales from 1974 to 2011 and reported a total of 1,149 whales landed by hunters from 12 villages, with Barrow landing the most whales (n = 590) and Shaktoolik landing only one. Alaska Natives landed 38 whales in 2011 (Suydam et al. 2012), 55 in 2012 (Suydam et al. 2013), 46 in 2013 (George and Suydam 2014, Suydam et al. 2014), 38 in 2014 (Suydam et al. 2015), and 39 in 2015 (Suydam et al. 2016). The number of whales landed at each village varies greatly from year to year, as success is influenced by village size and ice and weather conditions. The efficiency of the hunt (the percent of whales struck that are retrieved) has increased since the implementation of the bowhead whale quota in 1978. In 1978, the efficiency was about 50%. In 2015, 39 of 49 whales struck were landed, resulting in an efficiency of 80% (Suydam et al. 2016). Suydam et al. (2016) reported that the current mean efficiency, from 2006 through 2015, is 75.3%.

Canadian and Russian Natives also take whales from this stock. Hunters from the western Canadian Arctic community of Aklavik harvested one whale in 1991 and one in 1996. No catches for Western Arctic bowhead whales were reported by either Canadian or Russian hunters for 2006-2007 (IWC 2008, 2009) or by Russia in 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, or 2015 (IWC 2011; Ilyashenko 2013; Ilyashenko and Zharikov 2015, 2016), but two bowhead whales were taken in Russia in 2008 (IWC 2010), two in 2010 (IWC 2012), and one in 2013 (Ilyashenko and Zharikov 2014). The average annual subsistence take (by Natives of Alaska, Russia, and Canada) during the 5-year period from 2011 through 2015 is 43 landed bowhead whales.

Other Mortality

Pelagic commercial whaling for bowhead whales was conducted from 1849 to 1914 in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas (Bockstoce et al. 2007). During the first two decades of the fishery (1850-1870), over 60% of the estimated pre-whaling population was killed, and effort remained high into the 20th century (Braham 1984). Woodby and Botkin (1993) estimated that the pelagic whaling industry harvested 18,684 whales from this stock. During 1848-1919, shore-based whaling operations (including landings as well as struck and lost estimates from the U.S., Canada, and Russia) took an additional 1,527 animals (Woodby and Botkin 1993). An unknown percentage of the animals taken by the shore-based operations were harvested for subsistence and not commercial purposes. Historical harvest estimates likely underestimate the actual harvest as a result of under-reporting of the Soviet catches (Yablokov 1994) and incomplete reporting of struck and lost animals.

Transient killer whales are the only known predators of bowhead whales. In a study of marks on bowhead whales taken in the subsistence harvest between spring 1976 and fall 1992, 4.1% to 7.9% had scars indicating that they had survived attacks by killer whales (George et al. 1994). Of 378 complete records for killer whale scars collected from 1990 to 2012, 30 whales (7.9%) had scarring "rake marks" consistent with killer whale injuries and another 10 had possible injuries (George et al. 2017). A higher rate of killer whale rake mark scars occurred during 2002-2012 than in the previous decade. George et al. (2017) noted this may be due to better reporting and/or sampling bias, an increase in killer whale population size, an increase in occurrence of killer whales at high latitudes (Clarke et al. 2013), or a longer open water period offering more opportunities to attack bowhead whales. At least 2 of ~11 bowhead whale carcasses observed during the Aerial Survey of Arctic Marine Mammals (ASAMM) project in 2015 had clear evidence of killer whale predation (rake marks, missing jaw/tongue) (Suydam et al. 2016).

With increasing ship traffic and oil and gas activities in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas, bowhead whales may become increasingly at risk from ship strikes. Currently, ship-strike injuries appear to be uncommon on bowhead whales in Alaska (George et al. 2017). Only 10 whales harvested between 1990 and 2012 (~2% of the total sample) showed clear evidence of scarring from ship propeller injuries.

STATUS OF STOCK

Based on currently available data, the estimated mean annual mortality and serious injury rate incidental to U.S. commercial fisheries (0.2 whales) is not known to exceed 10% of the PBR (10% of PBR = 16) and, therefore, can be considered to be insignificant. The total annual level of human-caused mortality and serious injury (43 whales) is not known to exceed the PBR (161) nor the IWC annual maximum strike limit (67). The Western Arctic bowhead whale stock has been increasing; the estimate of 16,820 whales from 2011 is between 31% and 168% of the pre-exploitation abundance of 10,000 to 55,000 whales estimated by Brandon and Wade (2004, 2006). However, the stock is classified as a strategic stock because the bowhead whale is listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and is therefore also designated as depleted under the MMPA.

There are key uncertainties in the assessment of the Western Arctic stock of bowhead whales. Although there are few records of bowhead whales being killed or seriously injured incidental to commercial fishing, about 12% of harvested bowhead whales examined for scarring (59/486 records) had scars indicating line entanglement wounds and the southern range of the population does overlap with commercial pot fisheries. The stock may be particularly sensitive to anthropogenic sound; under some circumstances, the stock changes either distribution or calling behavior in response to levels of anthropogenic sounds that are slightly above ambient. The reduction in sea ice may lead to increased predation of bowhead whales by killer whales.

HABITAT CONCERNS

Vessel traffic in arctic waters is increasing, largely due to an increase in commercial shipping. This increase in vessel traffic could result in an increased number of vessel collisions with bowhead whales (Huntington et al. 2015).

Increasing oil and gas development in the Arctic has led to an increased risk of various forms of pollution, including oil spills, in bowhead whale habitat, and the technology for effectively recovering spilled oil in icy conditions is lacking. Also of concern is noise produced by seismic surveys and vessel traffic resulting from shipping and offshore energy exploration, development, and production operations. Evidence indicates that bowhead whales are sensitive to noise from offshore drilling platforms and seismic survey operations (Richardson and Malme 1993, Richardson 1995, Davies 1997). Bowhead whales often avoid sound sources associated with active drilling (Schick and Urban 2000) and seismic operations (Miller et al. 1999). Studies in the 1980s indicated that bowhead whales reacting to seismic activity in feeding areas appeared to recover from behavioral changes within 30-60 minutes following the end of the activity (Richardson et al. 1986, Ljungblad et al. 1988). However, monitoring studies of 3-D seismic exploration in the nearshore Beaufort Sea during 1996-1998 demonstrated that nearly all fall-migrating bowhead whales avoided an area within 20 km of an active seismic source (Richardson et al. 1999). Furthermore, the studies also suggested that the bowhead whales' offshore displacement may have begun roughly 35 km (19 nautical miles or 22 statute miles) east of the activity and may have persisted more than 30 km to the west (Richardson et al. 1999). Richardson et al. (1986) observed that some feeding bowhead whales started to turn away from a 30-airgun array with a source level of 248 dB re 1 µPa at a distance of 7.5 km (4.7 mi) and swam away when the vessel was within about 2 km (1.2 mi); other whales in the area continued feeding until the seismic vessel was within 3 km (1.9 mi). Further studies have shown that feeding bowhead whales had a greater tolerance of higher sound levels than did migrating whales (Miller et al. 2005, Harris et al. 2007). Data from an aerial monitoring program in the Alaska Beaufort Sea during 2006-2008 also indicated that bowhead whales feeding during late summer and autumn did not exhibit large-scale distribution changes in relation to seismic operations (Funk et al. 2010). Persistent feeding behavior in the presence of seismic survey noise does not necessarily mean that the feeding bowhead whales are unaffected by the noise. Feeding bowhead whales may be sufficiently motivated to continue feeding in a given area despite noise-induced stress or physiological effects (MMS 2008). A study by Blackwell et al. (2015) found that bowhead whales react differently to different thresholds of seismic noise. At relatively low cumulative exposure levels (as soon as airguns were just detectable), bowhead whales almost doubled their call rates. Once cumulative exposure levels exceeded 127 dB re 1 μPa^2-s, call rates decreased. Bowhead whales went completely silent at received levels over 160 dB re 1 μPa^2-s. These authors note that the existence of two behavioral thresholds for calling by bowhead whales can explain results of previous studies that found variability in bowhead whale call rates in the presence or absence of airgun pulses (i.e., Greene et al. 1998).

Climate change is resulting in warming of northern latitudes at about twice the rate of more temperate latitudes, increasing the immediacy of this threat for bowhead whales and other arctic species. Global climate model projections for the next 50-100 years consistently show pronounced warming over the Arctic, accelerated sea-ice loss, and continued permafrost degradation (IPCC 2007, USGS 2011, Jeffries et al. 2015). Within the Arctic, some of the largest changes are projected to occur in the Bering, Beaufort, and Chukchi seas (Chapman and Walsh 2007, Walsh 2008). Ice-associated animals, including the bowhead whale, may be sensitive to changes in arctic weather, sea surface temperatures, sea-ice extent, and the concomitant effect on prey availability. Laidre et al. (2008) concluded that on a worldwide basis, bowhead whales were likely to be moderately sensitive to climate change based on an analysis of various life-history features that could be affected by climate. Currently, there are insufficient data to make reliable projections of the effects of arctic climate change on bowhead whales. George et al. (2006) showed that landed bowhead whales had better body condition during years of light ice cover. Similarly, George et al. (2015) found an overall improvement in bowhead whale body condition and a positive correlation between body condition and summer sea-ice loss over the last 2.5 decades in the Pacific Arctic. George et al. (2015) speculated that sea-ice loss has positive effects on secondary trophic production in the short term within the Western Arctic bowhead whales' summer feeding region.

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