

Terms of Reference

National Peer Review Meeting (by teleconference)

Review of Information for the Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*) in the Canadian Atlantic and Arctic Prior to Assessment by COSEWIC

May 30, 2007 (from 11:00 am to 3 pm – Ottawa/Eastern Standard Time)

Chairperson: P. Simon

Context

The implementation of the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA), proclaimed in June 2003, begins with an assessment of a species' risk of extinction by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). COSEWIC is a non-government scientific advisory body that has been established under Section 14(1) of SARA to perform species assessments which provide the scientific foundation for listing species under SARA. Therefore, an assessment initiates the regulatory process whereby the competent Minister must decide whether or not to accept COSEWIC's assessment and add a species to Schedule 1 of SARA, which would result in legal protection for the species under the Act. If the species is already on Schedule 1 of SARA, the Minister may decide to keep the species on the list, reclassify it as per the COSEWIC assessment, or to remove it from the list (Section 27 of SARA).

DFO, as the primary generator and archivist of information on aquatic species, is to provide COSEWIC with the best information available to ensure that an accurate assessment of the status of a species can be undertaken.

Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) were assessed by COSEWIC in April 1999 and in November 2001. The last report was based on the 1999 status report with an addendum. As a result of the 2001 assessment, five populations of killer whales were identified of which the Northeast Pacific populations are currently on Schedule 1 of SARA:

- Northeast Pacific southern residents (Endangered)
- Northeast Pacific northern residents (Threatened)
- Northeast Pacific transients (Threatened)
- Northeast Pacific offshore (Special Concern)
- Northwest Atlantic/Eastern Arctic (Data Deficient)

The killer whale was listed on COSEWIC's fall 2006 Call for Bids to satisfy the requirement to review the classification of each species at risk at least once every 10 years (Section 24 of SARA). Since the last full status report was produced in 1999, a new assessment is due for 2009. The Marine Mammal Subcommittee of COSEWIC will be meeting in September 2007 to review the draft of the killer whale status report. This teleconference is being held to give DFO the opportunity to look at the most recent data and analyses available regarding killer whale status for the Atlantic and Arctic populations, and to provide up-to-date peer-reviewed information that will be used during the next COSEWIC assessment. The Pacific populations of killer whale will not be included in this teleconference review as sufficient information for the COSEWIC status report update has been reviewed as a result of the recent drafting of recovery strategies for the resident and transient populations.

This peer review may be considered as part of the work done by the National Marine Mammal Peer Review Committee (NMMPRC). The next annual meeting of NMMPRC will be held during fall 2007, too late to provide the Marine Mammal SSC with its review prior to the SSC's September meeting.

Meeting Objectives

The overall objective of this teleconference is to peer-review DFO information relevant to the COSEWIC status assessment for killer whales (Northwest Atlantic/Eastern Arctic population), considering data related to the status and trends of, and threats to killer whales inside and outside of Canadian waters, and the strengths and limitations of the information. This information will be available to COSEWIC, the authors of the status report, and the Chairs of the Marine Mammals COSEWIC Species Specialist Subcommittee.

Two working papers related to killer whale status will be submitted for review:

1. Status of knowledge on Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) in the Canadian Arctic (J. Higdon)
2. Distribution and abundance of Killer whales in Atlantic Canada (J. Lawson & Snow)

Note: another manuscript on the relationship between killer whale sightings in Hudson Bay and declining sea ice in Hudson Strait (Higdon and Ferguson as authors) could be discussed. The analyses for the manuscript are not included in the report for review, but it may be ready for review by the time the meeting occurs.

The working papers should be made available to all participants by May 18, 2007.

Output of the meeting

The key conclusions/recommendations will address the basis for assessing status of the Canadian Arctic and Atlantic Killer whale populations considered by COSEWIC. The scientific information/advice issued from this meeting should be made available for COSEWIC by early July 2007 and will also be available for other meetings (e.g. International Whaling Commission meetings) if necessary. The final version of the minutes of the meeting will be part of the CSAS Proceedings report produced at the next annual NMMPRC meeting (Fall 2007). CSAS Research documents are also expected from the working papers submitted for review.

Participation

Participation is expected from regional DFO experts, COSEWIC, external reviewers, and from the DFO SARA Secretariat.