

Western gray whale

Fact sheet



Gray whale

Physical features

The gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) is a marine mammal which can attain up to 15 meters in length. Instead of a dorsal fin, it has a small hump followed by a series of bumps or “knuckles” along the spine. Its skin is mottled gray. The distinctive skin markings are used to identify individuals.

Migrations

The species is known for its long-distance migrations between low-latitude calving and mating grounds near continental coasts and high-latitude feeding grounds in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic.

Western versus eastern population

- The **eastern gray whale** migrates annually between Alaska/north-eastern Siberia and Mexico.
- The **western gray whale** migrates annually between north-eastern Russia and China, Korea and/or Japan.

Both populations were driven to very low numbers by commercial whaling. The eastern gray whale has recovered substantially and now numbers about 20,000 individuals, but the western gray whale remains in a precarious state.

Population status and threats

How many western gray whales are there?

The estimated population size in 2009 was about 130 whales, including only around 30 mature females.

Why are we concerned?

The population is slowly growing but the death of just one mature female per year could send it back towards extinction. Human activities throughout the whales' geographic range can disturb the fine energetic balance that these animals seek to maintain. The population is listed as **critically endangered** on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™.

Where are they located?

Western gray whales feast throughout the summer and autumn in the waters off Sakhalin Island in eastern Russia. In late autumn, they migrate to their wintering area(s) where they fast and breed. In the spring, they migrate back to eastern Russia. Little is currently known about the migration routes and wintering areas of western gray whales. A whale tagged in October 2010 should

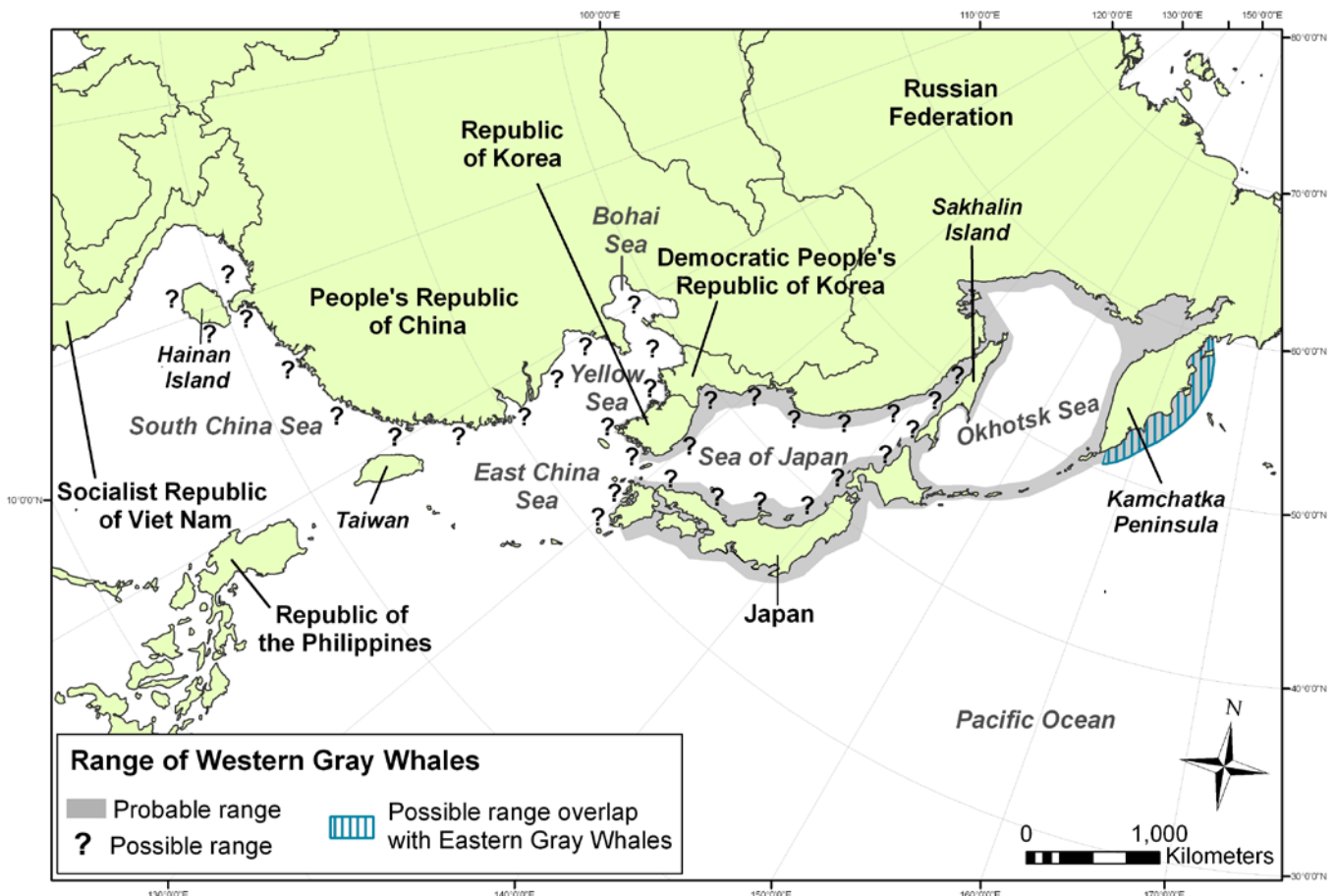
provide some direct information on where they go after leaving the summer feeding area, and it is expected that more whales will be tagged in the coming years. This major satellite tagging initiative is being led by the International Whaling Commission, with support from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel (WGWAP), Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd. (Sakhalin Energy) and Exxon Neftegas Ltd.

What are the key threats?

Major threats across the range of western gray whales include:

- entrapment in set nets;
- entanglement in other types of fishing gear;
- underwater noise (especially in feeding areas); and
- exposure to spilled oil.

Offshore oil and gas development in the whales' feeding areas is a significant concern. Seismic surveys involved in oil and gas exploration and development employ powerful, repeated airgun pulses. This noise is dangerous for nearby animals and can force whales to move away from their best feeding areas.



Conservation actions and actors

What is being done?

Since 2004, the oil and gas company Sakhalin Energy has joined forces with IUCN to minimize potential risks from the company's operations to the western gray whale population.

Initially, IUCN responded to Sakhalin Energy's request for help by convening an Independent Scientific Review Panel to evaluate the company's planned approach for minimizing the impacts of construction activities in the vicinity of Sakhalin Island, Russia, during the 2005 open-water season. In 2006, again at the request of Sakhalin Energy, IUCN convened a longer-term panel (**the Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel – WGWAP**) to advise the company on a more regular basis and thus strengthen its monitoring and mitigation efforts.

What is the WGWAP?

The WGWAP is a group of 11 leading scientists from a variety of backgrounds that provide independent review and advice on Sakhalin Energy's operational plans and mitigation measures.

The WGWAP provides a mechanism for scientifically rigorous independent assessment. Moreover, it can serve as a model of how business, scientists and the conservation community can work constructively and non-confrontationally to address environmental issues.

It was convened by IUCN in 2006 at the request of Sakhalin Energy, for an initial period of five years.

www.iucn.org/wgwap/wgwap

Who is Sakhalin Energy?

Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd., known as Sakhalin Energy, is a Russia-based oil and gas company. It is the operator of the Sakhalin-2 project in eastern Russia. Under the shareholding structure of Sakhalin Energy, Gazprom holds 50% plus 1 share, Shell 27.5%, Mitsui 12.5% and Mitsubishi 10%.

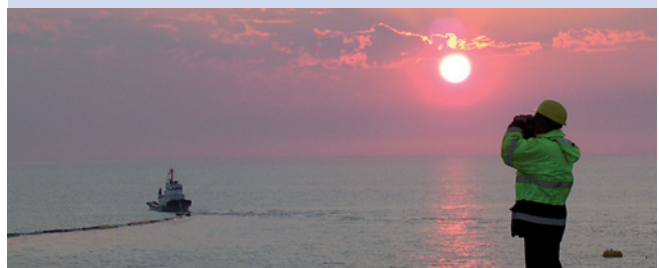
www.sakhalinenergy.ru/en/

What is IUCN's role?

IUCN is the impartial convenor of the WGWAP. It appoints WGWAP members, effectively links the relevant stakeholders, organizes panel meetings, facilitates information flow and ensures the transparency and openness of the process.

What has been achieved?

- In 2005, Sakhalin Energy revised its operation and construction plans to reduce risks to the whales. For example, underwater pipelines were re-routed to avoid feeding areas, a decision that required 180 km of additional pipeline;
- Through a WGWAP task force, researchers working for oil and gas companies and independent scientists agreed to share certain kinds of data. This has allowed the standardization and cross-verification of photo-identification databases as well as a joint population analysis;
- Over the years, Sakhalin Energy has integrated more robust scientific monitoring elements into its annual work program;
- Following the WGWAP's recommendations, Sakhalin Energy postponed a seismic survey planned for 2009 until June 2010. Measures to monitor and minimize the impacts of the survey were developed collaboratively by the WGWAP and Sakhalin Energy, and were put in place by the company in 2010. For example, safety buffers were set up around the survey vessel and real-time acoustic and visual monitoring prevented exposure of whales to damaging doses of noise.
- A globally authoritative and credible mechanism has been established linking independent scientists, the private sector, governments, financial institutions and NGOs. This has led to conservation actions based on open, structured dialogue amongst parties.



What else needs to be done to ensure the recovery of this population?

While Sakhalin Energy's engagement with IUCN is extremely positive, a comprehensive conservation strategy is needed, which takes into account all significant threats, not only around Sakhalin Island but throughout the entire geographic range of this population. Broad engagement of the range states, relevant companies and civil society is needed for the population to survive and recover.

IUCN is therefore implementing a Rangewide Conservation Plan for western gray whales, in collaboration with the International Whaling Commission.

www.iucn.org/wgwap/rangewide_initiative/

About IUCN

IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges by supporting scientific research; managing field projects all over the world; and bringing governments, NGOs, the UN, international conventions and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice.

The world's oldest and largest global environmental network, IUCN is a democratic membership union with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, and almost 11,000 volunteer scientists and experts in some 160 countries. IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 professional staff in 60 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world. IUCN's headquarters are located in Gland, near Geneva, in Switzerland. www.iucn.org

For more information

Please visit: www.iucn.org/wgwap

Finn Larsen, Programme Officer, IUCN Global Marine and Polar Programme: finn.larsen@iucn.org

Béatrice Riché, Logistics and Communications Officer, IUCN Global Marine and Polar Programme: beatrice.riche@iucn.org

Borjana Pervan, Media Relations Officer, IUCN Global Communications: borjana.pervan@iucn.org

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