

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. 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

In order 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 away from shallow, nearshore feeding areas and out over waters too deep for walrus to reach the ocean bottom. That leaves them with two options: undertake a marathon swim to reach their calves on the more-distant ice, or congregate on the coast. In 2014, an astonishing 35,000 walrus were spotted on a single island. With two sets of flippers and weighing in at 4,000 pounds for males and 2,500 for females, they are ungainly on land, so when amassed in such large numbers, walrus are vulnerable to stampeding if they are disturbed. **In 2007, a year that set a record for Arctic sea ice loss, 3,000 walrus, mostly calves, were crushed to death in stampedes along the coast of Russia.**

References

Associated Press. 2007. 3000 walrus die in stampedes tied to climate. December 14. <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/22260892>

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