

Beluga whale *Delphinapterus leucas*



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Beluga whale © Oceanogràfic

Beluga whales are an arctic whale **species** and the only **cetacean species** that naturally occur in this white colour. Their name comes from Russian word “belukha” which means white from their distinguishable colour. Beluga whales, are however, not born white. **Calves** are born grey and lighten in colour in the next 14-18 years when they become pure white. They are nicknamed the “sea canary” for their wide variety of **trills, clicks, squeaks, and whistles** that can be heard even above the surface.

Adult length 5.5 metres

Adult weight 1,500 kg

Maximum age 80 years

Eats Arctic cod, herring, salmon, shrimp, squid

Group size 2 -25

Predators killer whales, polar bears

IUCN status vulnerable (2023)

Atlantic Arctic abundance >100,000

Hunted in 🇸🇪 275 belugas/year
mean 2019-2023

Main threats:



Climate change



Pollution



Noise disturbance



Habitat degradation

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Beluga whales are unique among **cetaceans** due to their seven neck **vertebrae** that are not fused together, enabling them to move their heads up, down, and side-to-side. This flexibility helps them in navigating icy waters, locating **prey**, and more effectively directing their **echolocation** signals, used for communication and hunting. They can also alter the shape of their **melon**—a fatty organ used for **echolocation** and communication—by controlling facial muscles and blowing air around its sinuses.



Different shapes of melon of beluga (a) relaxed, (b) push, (c) flat.
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A pod of beluga whales entrapped in the sea ice © Malcolm Ramsay

Beluga whales live in cold Arctic waters, wintering in **polynyas** and **leads** among the **pack ice**, and moving closer to shallow bays and estuaries of the large northern rivers during summer. Because of their winter icy **environment**, beluga **pods** can occasionally find themselves **entrapped** in the sea ice. This happens when ice forms around the **pod**, trapping them in small pool they are unable to leave from. While **entanglements** are a form of natural mortality for belugas, their occurrences may increase due to different human activities or as a consequence of changing **sea ice** due to climate change.



Research: What is the role of beluga whales in the Arctic **ecosystem**? How would changes in the beluga whale **populations** affect their environment?