Beluga whale Delphinapterus leucas



+ Hvítfiskur Qilalugaq qaqortaq # Mjaldur Hvithval Vilgesguolli Hvidhval





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:









Habitat degradation

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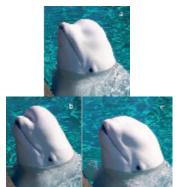








Beluga whales are unique among cetaceans due to their seven neck vertebrae that are not fused together, enabling them to move their heads up, down, and side-to-side. This flexibility helps them in navigating icy waters, locating prey, and more effectively directing their echolocation signals, used for 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. © Richard et al. (2024)



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 entrapments 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?