

Narwhal *Monodon monoceros*



Náhvalur
 Qilalugaq qernertaq
 Náhvalur
 Narhval
 Narhval



Two narwhals © Paul Nicklen

Narwhals are medium size Arctic **toothed whales**, known for the **tusk** that male narwhals develop. They have light grey skin with darker spots along their backs and sides, and white bellies. This colouration inspired their name, derived from the Old Norse words "nar" meaning corpse, and "hval" meaning whale. Along with belugas and bowhead whales, narwhals are one of only three **species** that live their entire lives in the cold Arctic waters. They winter in dense **pack ice**, using cracks and openings in the ice for breathing, and move to shallower, ice-free coastal waters in summer.

Adult length 4.6 metres
Adult weight 1,600 kg
Maximum age >100 years
Eats fish and squid
Group size 2-10

Predators killer whales, polar bears
IUCN status vulnerable (2023)
NA abundance 85,000–100,000
Hunted in 472 whales/year
 mean 2019-2023

Main threats:



Climate change



Hunting



Pollution



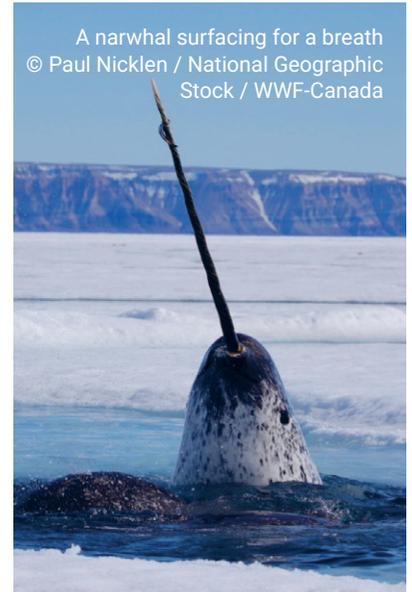
Noise disturbance

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Narwhals are easily recognisable by their **tusk**, a hollow upper **canine** tooth. Most have one **tusk** (on the left), but 1 in 500 males has two, with only one recorded case of a female having two. **Tusks** begin to emerge when narwhals are around two to three years old, spiralling counterclockwise as they grow, and can reach lengths of up to three metres. Surprisingly flexible, they can bend up to 30 centimetres without breaking. While there are many theories about their function, such as drilling through the ice, detecting changes in seawater or spearing fish, it is most likely that the **tusk** is a **secondary sexual characteristic**, used by males to establish social rank or attract females, who tend to choose mates with longer **tusks**.



A narwhal surfacing for a breath © Paul Nicklen / National Geographic Stock / WWF-Canada



Skull morphology of narwhal, beluga and narlugas © Mikkel Høegh Post

The narluga is a **hybrid** between a narwhal and a beluga. In the late 1980s, an Inuit hunter caught a unique animal with grey skin, beluga-like **flippers**, and a tail resembling that of a narwhal. Its skull showed traits of both **species**, but the most distinct feature was the animals' teeth: 18 outwardly extending teeth that suggest the animal was a **bottom feeder**, using its teeth as shovels to root through sand. DNA analysis revealed that the animal was a male **offspring** of a narwhal mother and beluga father.



Research: Despite their large size, blue whales feed almost exclusively on tiny krill. How did blue whales, and other baleen whales, get so large?