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Species Profile

Harbour Porpoise Northwest Atlantic population

Scientific Name:	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
Taxonomy Group:	Mammals
Range:	Atlantic Ocean
Last COSEWIC Assessment:	April 2006
Last COSEWIC Designation:	Special Concern
SARA Status:	Schedule 2, Threatened (SARA Schedule 1 provisions do not apply)

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Taxonomy

The subspecies present along the Atlantic coast of Canada is *Phocoena phocoena phocoena*; the subspecies present on the Pacific coast is *P. p. vomerina*.

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Description

Harbour Porpoises are among the smallest whales; in eastern Canada few individuals exceed 1.7 m in total length. Females are larger than males, and typically reach lengths of about 160 cm and weights of 65 kg. Like all porpoises, they have rounded heads that lack an obvious rostrum or beak. A small, triangular dorsal fin is located at about the middle of the back. The sides are a

mottled greyish-white and fade to an almost white ventral surface. A black cape extends over the back and sides, although its extent varies considerably among individuals and populations. Individuals may also have dark patches on their faces. There is no difference in coloration between males and females, but the calves are usually darker than the adults.

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Distribution and Population

Harbour Porpoises are widely distributed over the continental shelves of the temperate northern hemisphere, with two populations in Canada. On the west coast, members of the Pacific Ocean population occur throughout the coastal waters of British Columbia. On the east coast, members of the Northwest Atlantic population are found from the Bay of Fundy north to Cape Aston, at approximately 70° N, and south to North Carolina.

The Harbour Porpoise Northwest Atlantic population is made up of four discrete sub-populations; three in Canadian waters (Newfoundland-Labrador, Gulf of St. Lawrence, and Bay of Fundy-Gulf of Maine), and one off the western coast of Greenland.

There are no range-wide estimates of the abundance of Harbour Porpoises in eastern Canada, but it seems likely that the Northwest Atlantic population is greater than 50 000 individuals.

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Habitat

Harbour Porpoises are found primarily over continental shelves, and occasionally in deeper waters. The species is well adapted to cold water and is seldom found in water warmer than 16°C. True to its name, the Harbour Porpoise sometimes frequents bays and harbours, particularly during the summer. There is even one record from British Columbia of an individual found 55 km up the Fraser River. They are known to spend time in areas which have physiographic features that help to concentrate prey, or make prey easier to capture. They need to feed frequently and stay relatively close to patches of prey, sometimes moving quickly between areas of suitable habitat separated by tens or even hundreds of kilometres.

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Biology

There have been no estimates of the annual survival rates of this species, but the species is relatively short-lived compared to other toothed whales and few individuals live to twenty years of age.

Female Harbour Porpoises become sexually mature at about three years of age, and mating is restricted to a few weeks in the early summer. The gestation period is 10 to 11 months, and the calves nurse for at least eight months. In many eastern Canadian populations, most mature female porpoises become pregnant each year, spending most of their adult lives simultaneously pregnant and lactating.

The diet of the Harbour Porpoise is made up of a variety of small fishes and squid, including cod, herring, hake, capelin, and sand lance. The calves begin to take solid food late in the summer by feeding on plankton, especially small shrimp-like crustaceans. Squid seem to be more important in the diet of Pacific Ocean Harbour Porpoises than in that of the Atlantic population.

Harbour Porpoises are preyed upon by Great White Sharks, Killer Whales and, in some parts of their range, by Bottlenose Dolphins. Little is known about the role of disease in the natural

mortality of Harbour Porpoises, but many emaciated, dead juveniles are found stranded along the east coast of the United States each spring, apparently having starved to death.

Harbour Porpoises are occasionally observed in large aggregations, usually associated with high prey concentrations, but they are typically seen in small groups of a few individuals. Observations indicate that the social groupings are fluid, and that individual porpoises sometimes use the same habitat in consecutive years. Harbor Porpoises are shy animals that do not respond well to being kept in captivity, and intensive human activities in coastal waters may have a negative effect on their populations.

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Threats

The most important recent threat to Harbour Porpoises in eastern Canada is bycatch in bottom-set gill nets used to capture groundfish; this threat has decreased substantially with the depletion of groundfish stocks and consequent reductions in fishing. Other potential threats include: habitat degradation; loss of habitat resulting from the use of acoustic harassment devices, particularly around Salmon aquaculture sites; and environmental contamination by organochlorines (OCs) and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

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Protection

Federal Protection

Species that have been designated at risk by COSEWIC since the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) was written must be added to Schedule 1 through a regulatory amendment. Information on this procedure is available in the [Assessment](#) section. If Harbour Porpoise, Northwest Atlantic population, is added to Schedule 1, it will benefit from the protections afforded by SARA. More information about SARA, including how it protects individual species, is available in the [Species at Risk Act: A Guide](#).

The Harbour Porpoise is protected from certain activities under the *Marine Mammal Regulations* of the *Fisheries Act*. These regulations do not, however, have any provisions to address the bycatch of marine mammals in commercial fisheries.

Provincial and Territorial Protection

[To know if this species is protected by provincial or territorial laws, consult the provinces and territories websites.](#)

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Other Protection or Status

The Harbour Porpoise is on the IUCN (World Conservation Union) Red List of Threatened Animals. It is also included in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which sets controls on the international trade and movement of species that have been, or may be, threatened due to commercial exploitation.

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Documents

[COSEWIC Status Reports](#) (1 record(s) found.)
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11 record(s) found.

COSEWIC Status Reports

[COSEWIC Status Report - Harbour Porpoise \(Northwest Atlantic Population\)](#) (2006)

Harbour porpoises are among the smallest cetaceans and, in eastern Canada, few individuals exceed 1.7 m in total length. Like all phocoenids, harbour porpoises possess rounded heads that lack an external rostrum or beak. A small, triangular dorsal fi...

COSEWIC Assessments

[COSEWIC Assessment - Harbour Porpoise](#) (2004)

Designated Threatened in April 1990. Status re-examined and confirmed in April 1991. Downlisted to Special Concern in May 2003. Last assessment based on an update status report....

[COSEWIC Assessment - Harbour Porpoise](#) (2006)

The Northwest Atlantic population was designated Threatened in April 1990 and in April 1991. Status re-examined and designated Special Concern in May 2003 and in April 2006. Last assessment based on an update status report....

Response Statements

[Response Statements - Harbour Porpoise](#) (2004)

A response statement is a communications document that identifies how the Minister of the Environment intends to respond to the assessment of a wildlife species by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). The document p...

[Response Statements - Harbour Porpoise](#) (2006)

The species is widely distributed in eastern Canadian marine waters. Surveys of portions of the range (Bay of Fundy/Gulf of Maine and the Gulf of St. Lawrence) during the late 1990s indicated more than 100,000 porpoises. Incidental catch (bycatch) in...

Orders

[Order Acknowledging Receipt of the Assessments Done Pursuant to Subsection 23\(1\) of the Act \(2005\)](#) (2005)

The Order acknowledges receipt by the Governor in Council of 12 aquatic species done pursuant to subsection 23(1) of the Species at Risk Act (SARA) by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). The purpose of SARA is to p...

[Order Amending Schedules 1 to 3 to the Species at Risk Act](#) (2006)

The Minister of the Environment proposes recommending, pursuant to section 27 of the Species at Risk Act (SARA), that three aquatic species be added to Schedule 1, the List of Wildlife Species at Risk. This recommendation is based on the advice of th...

[Order Extending the Time for the Assessment of the Status of Wildlife Species](#) (2006)

The time provided for the assessment of the status of the wildlife species set out in the schedule is extended for 3 years from the day on which section 14 of the Species at Risk Act comes into force....

COSEWIC Annual Reports

[COSEWIC Annual Report - 2006](#) (2006)

2006 Annual Report to the The Minister of the Environment and the Canadian Endangered Species Conservation Council (CESCC) from the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada....

Permits and Related Agreements

[Explanation for issuing permit\(#DFO-MAR-2009-022\), pursuant to the provisions of section 73 of SARA \(2009\)](#)

(1) Line transect sightings survey The vessel will occupy line transects that will be determined at the beginning of each operational day. Sightings effort will be logged every 10 minutes. All marine mammals, reptiles and large pelagic fish will be ...

Consultation Documents

[Species at Risk Act \(SARA\), Legal Listing of Aquatic Species- Consultation Workbook for the Harbour Porpoise Phocoena phocoena, Northwest Atlantic population, in eastern Canadian waters \(2004\)](#)

Your opinion is being sought to assist the government of Canada in making an informed decision on whether to add the Harbour Porpoise (Northwest Atlantic population) to the Schedule 1 (the List of Wildlife Species at Risk) of the Species at Risk Act ...

Date Modified: 01/11/2010