

## Agency: Humpback whales' recovery is national success story

April 21 2015, byCaleb Jones

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In this July 11, 2008 file photo, a trio of humpback whales break the surface of the water as they work together in a group behavior known as "bubble feeding" off the coast of Cape Cod near Provincetown, Mass. The federal government is proposing removing most of the world's humpback whale population from the endangered species list. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries announced on Monday, Apr. 20, 2015 that they want to reclassify humpbacks into 14 distinct populations, and remove 10 of those from the list. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File)

The humpback whale became the unofficial symbol for the conservation movement in the last century.

The iconic mammal that can be found across the planet was on the verge of extinction. The international community banned whaling the species in 1966, and the U.S. government listed it as endangered four years later.

On Monday, federal officials proposed removing most of the world's [humpback whales](#) from the [endangered species list](#), noting their recovery after 45 years of protection and [restoration efforts](#) is a remarkable achievement.

"To be able to bring a species to a point where their population is doing well and they no longer meet those requirements to be on the [endangered species act](#), I think that is a really important success for us as a nation," said Donna Weiting, director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's protected resources office.

"So I think it's quite a big deal," she said at a news conference.

The agency is proposing dividing humpback whale populations into 14 categories and removing 10 of them from the endangered list. Of the remaining four categories, two would be listed as threatened, and the other two would stay on the endangered list.

But just because the animal could be taken off the endangered list doesn't mean there soon will be hunting seasons again.

All the whales remain protected under the Marine Mammals Protection Act, and the United States is still an active member of the International Whaling Commission, which banned commercial whaling in 1966, said Angela Somma, chief of NOAA Fisheries' [endangered species](#) division.

Just a few places in the world allow humpback whale hunting, and that's for aboriginal subsistence only, according to the commission's website. Three nations—Japan, Norway and Iceland—still allow the mammals to be killed for scientific research.



In this Jan. 23, 2005 file photo, a humpback whale leaps out of the water in the channel off the town of Lahaina on the island of Maui in Hawaii. The federal government is proposing removing most of the world's humpback whale population from the endangered species list. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries announced on Monday, April 20, 2015 that they want to reclassify humpbacks into 14 distinct populations, and remove 10 of those from the list. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon, file)

Humans hunted humpbacks in much higher numbers before their listing as endangered in 1970.

Officials say protection and restoration efforts have since increased the whales' numbers in many areas. Marta Nammack, NOAA Fisheries'



national Endangered Species Act listing coordinator, estimates the global population of humpbacks at around 90,000.

Among the humpback populations recommended for delisting is one that migrates each year from Hawaii to Alaska.

Decisions on which humpback groups to recommend for delisting were based on many factors, including the risks they face. The single largest threat to humpbacks is fishing activities that result in the whales becoming tangled in fishing gear and drowning, NOAA officials said.

The most important considerations in determining if whale populations should stay on the list are their size and growth rates, Weiting said.

"Ten of these populations are no longer in danger of extinction, which is our criteria for an endangered listing, nor are they likely to become so in the foreseeable future, our criteria for a threatened status," she said.

Some populations are growing at a rate of up to 11 percent annually since the listing, which requires federal approval for federally funded or authorized activities that could harm whales or their habitat.



In this April 28, 2009 file photo, water pours off the tail of a humpback whale as it dives at the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary off the coast of Massachusetts. The federal government is proposing removing most of the world's humpback whale population from the endangered species list. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries announced on Monday, April 20, 2015 that they want to reclassify humpbacks into 14 distinct populations, and remove 10 of those from the list. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa, file)

Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the whales' consideration for removal from the list is a good sign, but it might be premature.

Whales continue to be vulnerable to factors including climate change and ocean acidification, which affects their prey stock, she said.

"It would really be beneficial to continue to have the protections of the Endangered Species Act as the oceans change," she said.

The last species NOAA removed from the [endangered list](#) because of its recovery the eastern North Pacific population of gray whales, in 1994.



This Sept. 7, 2005 photo released by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows a humpback whale diving among an aggregation of short-tailed shearwaters in Cape Cheerful, near Unalaska, Alaska. The federal government is proposing removing most of the world's humpback whale population from the endangered species list. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries announced on Monday, April 20, 2015 that they want to reclassify humpbacks into 14 distinct populations, and remove 10 of those from the list. (Brenda Rone/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)

The public has 90 days to comment on the recommended changes.

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