

Feds take most humpback whales off endangered species list

September 6 2016, by Audrey Mcavoy



In this August 25, 2012 photo, boaters watch a humpback whale breach off the coast of Gloucester, Mass. Federal authorities are taking most humpback whales off the endangered species list. The National Marine Fisheries Service said Monday, Sept. 5, 2016 that nine of the 14 distinct populations of humpbacks have recovered enough in the last 40 years to warrant being removed from the endangered list. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)

Federal authorities took most humpback whales off the endangered species list Tuesday, saying their numbers have recovered through international efforts to protect the giant mammals.

Known for their acrobatic leaps from the sea and complex singing patterns, humpback whales were nearly hunted to extinction for their oil and meat by industrial-sized whaling ships well through the middle of the 20th century. But the species has been bouncing back since an international ban on commercial whaling took effect in 1966.

The moratorium on whaling remains in effect, despite the new classifications.

The National Marine Fisheries Service said it first had evidence to indicate there were 14 distinct populations of humpback whales around the world. It then said nine of these populations have recovered to the point where they no longer need Endangered Species Act Protections. These include whales that winter in Hawaii, the West Indies and Australia.

Before, the agency classified all humpback whales as one population. They had been listed as endangered since 1970.

"Today's news is a true ecological success story," Eileen Sobeck, assistant administrator for fisheries at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said in a statement.

The whales will continue to be protected under other federal laws, including the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Vessels will continue to have to stay a specific distance away from humpback whales in Hawaii and Alaska waters.

A Hawaii fishermen's group that petitioned for delisting three years ago said it was happy with the decision.

"We just saw a lot of whales. So we thought this is a success in ocean management and we wanted to point that out to the world—that things

are good with whales in Hawaii," said Phil Fernandez, president of the Hawaii Fishermen's Alliance for Conservation and Tradition.

An estimated 11,000 humpback whales breed in Hawaii waters each winter and migrate to Alaska to feed during the summer, the fisheries service said.

But an environmentalist group said the protections should stay in place.

"These whales face several significant and growing threats, including entanglement in fishing gear, so ending protections now is a step in the wrong direction," Kristen Monsell, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement.

Humpbacks that breed in Central America in the winter and feed off California and the Pacific Northwest in the summer are among those that will remain on the endangered list.

Marta Nammack, the fisheries service's Endangered Species Act listing coordinator, said that's because the population is estimated at only about 400 whales. These whales also face threats from vessel collisions and getting entangled in fishing gear, she said.

Whales that breed off Mexico and feed off California, the Pacific Northwest and Alaska will be listed as threatened. There are about 3,200 of the whales in this group, which is only about half of what scientists previously thought, Nammack said. The whales also face fishing gear entanglement threats.

The different classifications mean that Alaska's whales will be a mix.

In addition to whales that breed in Hawaii and Mexico, Alaska also gets whales that spend the winter in waters around Okinawa and the

Philippines. These whales, called the Western North Pacific population, are endangered. They number only about 1,000 and faces threats from energy exploration and development, whaling and fishing gear entanglements, Nammack said.

Humpback whales are also found along eastern coasts of the U.S. and Canada. These whales, which winter in the West Indies, are not being listed as endangered. They number about 10,000, the fisheries service said.

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