

# Walrus begin arriving near Alaska village in annual event

October 7 2016, by Rachel D'oro

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Pacific walrus are beginning to come ashore near a remote community on Alaska's northwest coast in what's become an annual marine mammal phenomenon caused by a warming climate.

The massive animals have gathered by the thousands each fall on a barrier island near the Inupiat Eskimo village of Point Lay in recent years. Last year, 35,000 walrus hauled out on the rocky beach.

Villagers notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Friday that the walrus have begun arriving and that about 1,000 are gathered on the island so far, said spokeswoman Andrea Medeiros.

Walrus prefer resting on sea ice to look out for predators such as polar bears. But in 2007, they began coming ashore on the northwest Alaska coast because of receding summer sea ice as Arctic temperatures have warmed.

Walrus are considered a major subsistence food for Point Lay residents.

Many worry that disturbances at the hauling site, such as the presence of airplanes overhead or visitors, could panic the walrus into stampedes that kill the smallest animals, Medeiros said.

"They're caretakers of those animals," she said. "They want to ensure that those animals are not disturbed while they're on shore."

Medeiros said the village is working with the agency on an outreach program to discourage people from visiting the animals' gathering site.

Only Alaska Natives who live in the state are allowed to hunt walrus.

Point Lay is a community of about 270. It is 700 miles northwest of Anchorage and 300 miles southwest of Barrow.

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