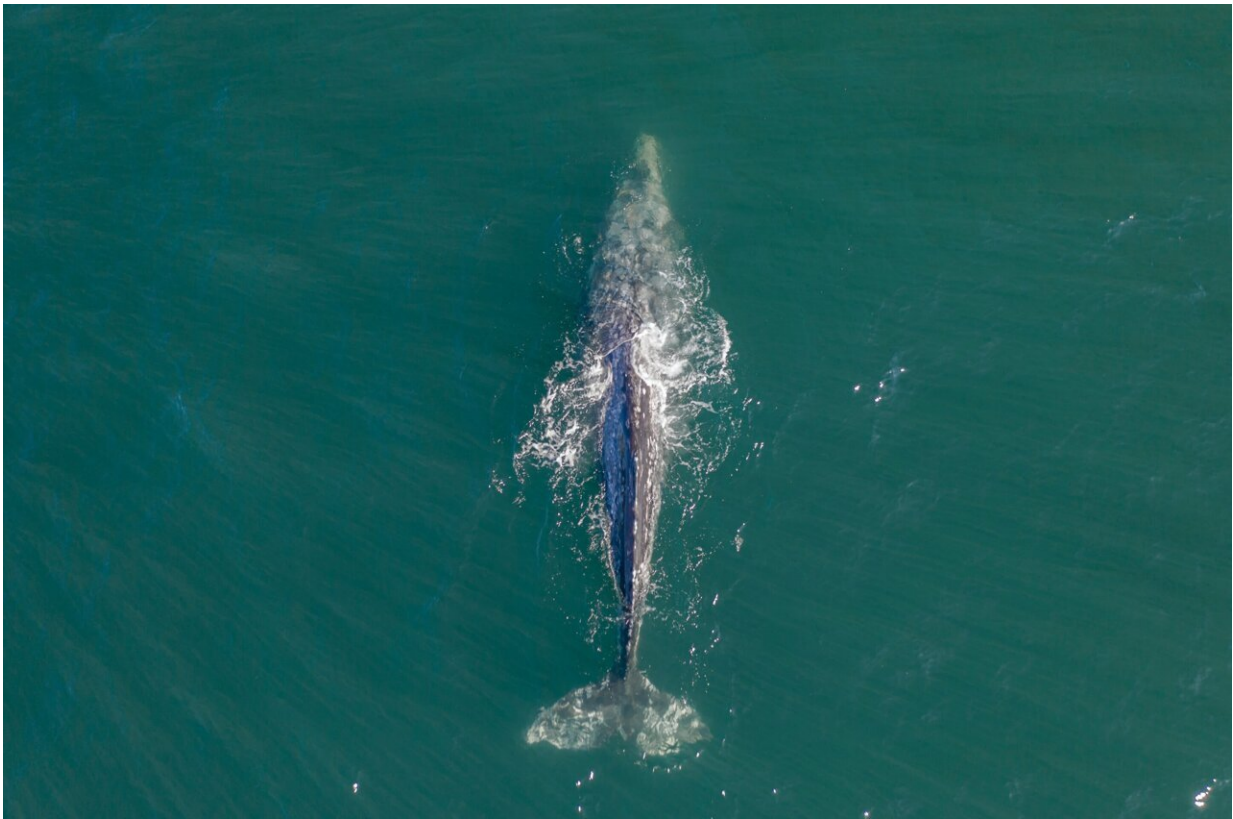


Makah Tribe will again be allowed to hunt gray whales off Washington coast

June 14 2024, by Conrad Swanson, The Seattle Times



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Not since the spring of 1999 have members of the Makah Tribe filed into a cedar canoe and paddled off Washington's coast to legally harpoon a gray whale, trailing its body back to shore for celebration and

ceremony.

Even that hunt—controversial at the time—was the tribe's first in more than seven decades.

But that's about to change. Officials with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration granted the tribe a waiver of the Marine Mammal Protection Act on June 13, handing the Makah people a victory they've sought for a generation.

The waiver represents the end of decades-long frustration and stress, said TJ Greene, chairman of the Makah Tribe. It's a cultural and historic success that belongs to the entire community, he said.

"This relieves a lot of tension," Greene said in an interview with The Seattle Times. "We have a generation of people that didn't have that opportunity and that takes a toll on us."

Officials with NOAA said they share the tribe's frustration over the drawn-out waiver process but celebrate its end. There are those who remain steadfast in their opposition to the hunt, though, and they do plan to keep fighting.

The earliest the tribe would be able to hunt is likely this fall, said Michael Milstein, a NOAA spokesperson. The tribe will have to apply for a permit to conduct each hunt, and as part of that process the administration will have to verify the population of gray whales and hold a public comment period.

Greene said hunters from the tribe will undergo a rigorous training process to ensure they only hunt whales approved under the waiver and do so safely. They plan to use the traditional cedar canoes and harpoon the whale but then use a firearm—likely a large-caliber rifle—for a

quick and humane kill.

The tribe's connection to the whales stretches back millennia and the tribe's 1855 treaty with the federal government explicitly recognizes the right of members to conduct the hunts.

Not only is the hunt an important part of the tribe's cultural and spiritual identity, Greene said, but the whales were also once a crucial portion of the community's diet.

"This is a food sovereignty issue. This is part of our traditional diet that was ripped away from us," he said. "We are needing that back into our lives, so we can be a healthy, vibrant and thriving community."

In all, the waiver will allow the tribe to hunt up to 25 gray whales over a 10-year period. The total number of gray whales that can be hunted globally won't change, however.

The current quota, regulated by the International Whaling Commission, splits the number of available whales between the Makah Tribe and the Chukotkan Natives in Russia, Milstein said. Under the waiver, the Makah Tribe will tap into the number of whales that had been previously transferred to Russia, and no more than two or three would be allowed to be hunted each year in U.S. waters.

While gray whales were once listed as an [endangered species](#), their populations recovered enough for the federal government to take them off the list in 1994. They are still protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, however.

Generally, the population of gray whales along the West Coast is quite healthy, said Chris Yates, assistant regional administrator with NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region. There are around 19,000 of them right

now.

So the tribe's right to hunt 25 whales over 10 years would effectively be an "undetectable" loss to the greater population, he said.

The hunts are opposed by the Animal Welfare Institute, said D.J. Schubert, a senior scientist with the nonprofit.

Other [gray whale](#) populations aren't as numerous, some groups only have hundreds remaining, and Schubert expressed concern that a whale from the wrong pod could be killed.

In addition, [climate change](#) also threatens the whales, either directly or by cutting into their food sources, Schubert said, and the hunt would act as an added stressor to their populations.

He did acknowledge the tribe's cultural connection to the process but spoke out against the hunts as a way of speaking on behalf of the whales.

"There is no easy solution here," he said.

Yates said "extreme precautions" will be in place to prevent the killing of endangered groups of whales, and Greene said the tribe plans for its own processes to be even more rigorous than those required by the federal government.

Still, the Animal Welfare Institute plans to oppose the permits when the tribe applies, Schubert said, and the organization is open to exploring other legal avenues should that strategy fail.

The tribe is no stranger to the scrutiny. During the 1999 hunt, it had to close down the reservation because people called in bomb threats to tribal schools, Greene said. Ultimately, the National Guard had to be on

standby.

"We don't want to see those things happen again," he said. "But there's a likelihood that they could, so we're prepared for that."

Additional controversy erupted in 2007, when five tribal members illegally hunted and killed a gray whale; the animal was killed, but the hunters were detained before the whale could be brought to shore. Two of those members served time in jail for the incident.

Now that the hunt is once more legal, the [tribe](#) will develop security measures and work closely with law enforcement to make sure its people are safe throughout the process, Greene said.

Details will be worked out in the months ahead, Greene said. For the moment, the victory belongs not only to this generation, the chairman said, but to everybody that came before them, including those who fought for the right to [hunt](#) back in 1855.

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Citation: Makah Tribe will again be allowed to hunt gray whales off Washington coast (2024, June 14) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-makah-tribe-gray-whales-washington.html>

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