

Whales and Whaling

Whale of a comeback

Officials say gray whale out of danger

By CHARLES PETIT
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The stunning comeback of the Pacific gray whale has prompted federal officials to propose removing it from the endangered species list.

Environmental groups are split on whether the whales, which depend on just a few breeding spots and hug the coast where they are vulnerable to human pollution and other activities, should remain officially endangered.

But all experts agree that the lumpy-nosed creatures, also known as California gray whales, have made a remarkable recovery from the time whalers nearly killed them off.

Ken Norris, professor emeritus of Natural History at UC Santa Cruz and a world authority on the gray whale, supported removing the great mammal from the endangered species list.

"It's just a great thing. I'm very much in favor of it," Norris said. "To have it on the list is an anachronism. It doesn't make sense. The species has recovered to (historic) levels."

Norris said the gray whale, unlike other whales hunted to the verge of extinction, was relatively fortunate in that there were about 2,000 of the animals left when their harvest by whalers was outlawed.

"That's a pretty low (population)," Norris said. "But it was a good reservoir of animals."

"It just shows you what can be done with protection," Norris said.

The resurgence of the gray whale population follows that of the California sea otter, elephant seals and other marine mammals



The Associated Press/Sentinel file

Federal officials want to drop the gray whale from the endangered species list.

who were once near extinction.

Today, about 21,000 gray whales migrate annually from summer feeding grounds in the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean to winter breeding and calving grounds in shallow lagoons in Baja California.

The stately parade has spawned a flourishing whale-watching industry as the 45-foot animals cruise the coast, seldom

more than a few dozen miles from shore.

"There are probably more California grays alive now than there were prior to the peak of the commercial whaling industry in the mid-1880s," said John Knauss, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in announcing the proposed rule change on Monday.

"This is a success story," said Knauss, whose agency includes the National Marine Fisheries Service that administers the portions of the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act covering whales.

If approved after a 60-day period for public comment, it would be the first time a marine mam-

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mal has been taken off the endangered species list.

Even if the rule change goes through, federal laws and international agreements will forbid the deliberate killing of the whales.

But some opposition developed immediately because the change in principle means fewer bureaucratic roadblocks to oil or mineral exploration in waters used by the whales, including the Bering Sea and migratory routes from Alaska to Mexico.

"It's a real bad idea," said David Phillips, executive director of Earth Island Institute.

"It's a sort of a sop to the oil industry more than anything else. When offshore oil proposals come along, they won't have to meet the test of protecting the gray whale."

Stephanie Moura, marine species coordinator at Greenpeace, said the whales should be downgraded from endangered to threatened, rather than dropped from the list altogether.

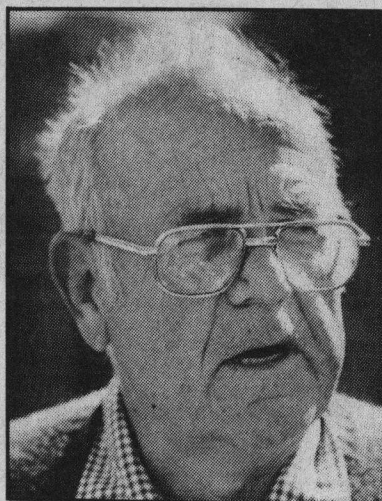
She said her group worries that without such status, threats such as oil spills or the harassment of boatloads of whale watchers may grow.

However, federal officials say that other regulations, along with the presence in the same waters of several still-endangered whale species, mean there will be no practical change in offshore permit processes.

At least one environmental group cautiously endorsed the proposed change.

Nina Young, mammalogist at the private, nonprofit Center for Marine Conservation in Washington, said the fishery service "seems to be acting responsibly. We feel it is important to recognize it when we do have a victory under the Endangered Species Act, and that it is not just in the business of adding species."

The gray whales' resurgence is an unusual bright note in worldwide efforts to bring whale populations up. Despite wide protection, such species as Bowheads, Right



Ken Norris
Supports whales' new status

Whales, Humpbacked Whales and Blue Whales continue to be so sparse that some scientists still fear they could slide into extinction.

Current regulations would require the national fisheries service

to closely monitor the whales' population and health for at least five years after the species was dropped from the endangered list.

The National Marine Laboratory in Seattle will have prime responsibility.

An additional "task group" of top marine scientists will be recruited nationwide as a watchdog on the monitoring program, said Nancy Foster, director of the fisheries services' Office of Protected Resources.

The California Gray Whales technically comprise the eastern stock of Pacific Gray Whales. A second population of the species, the western stock, migrates from near the Arctic to breeding grounds in Korea.

Scientists are not sure if the two groups are separate subspecies, but the western group is severely depleted and is subject to small-scale hunting by Siberian tribes who have harvested them for many generations.

Sentinel staff writer John Robinson contributed to this report.