

Southern Resident Orcas Listed as Endangered Species

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A group of killer whales that visits Washington State's Puget Sound every summer has been listed as an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) announced today.

Known officially as Southern Resident killer whales, they were proposed a year ago for "threatened" status under the Endangered Species Act.

"Recent information and further analysis leads our agency to conclude that the Southern Resident killer whale population is at risk of extinction, and should be listed as endangered," said Bob Lohn, regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service's Northwest region. "By giving it protection under the ESA, we have a better chance of keeping this population alive for future generations."

A species listed as threatened is at risk of becoming endangered; an endangered species is one at risk of extinction. The Southern Resident killer whale population experienced a 20 percent decline in the 1990s, raising concerns about its future. Many members of the group were captured during the 1970s for commercial display aquariums. The group continued to be put at risk from vessel traffic, toxic chemicals and limits on availability of food, especially salmon. It has only a small number of sexually mature males. Because the population historically has been small, it is susceptible to catastrophic risks, such as disease or oil spills.

Southern Resident killer whales already are protected, as are all marine mammals, by a 1972 law, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, under which the whales were officially listed as a depleted stock more than two years ago. A proposed conservation plan required by the depleted designation was published last month laying out the steps needed to restore the population to full health.

The new listing under the Endangered Species Act will require federal agencies to make sure their actions are not likely to harm the whales. NOAA Fisheries Service said its ongoing efforts to restore salmon stocks in Puget Sound should benefit the whales. Other federal agencies' efforts are likely to focus on toxic chemicals and vessel traffic.

The population peaked at 97 animals in the 1990s and then declined to 79 in 2001. It currently stands at 89 whales, including a solitary male that has taken up residence in a small inlet in British Columbia.

Although researchers have collected more than 30 years' worth of information on the Southern Residents, agency biologists said there are major gaps in knowledge, such as where the animals go when they're not in local waters. Because killer whales may live up to 90 years in the wild, existing data doesn't cover even one full life span for older animals. Research by NOAA Fisheries Service scientists to fill these gaps will continue, the agency said.

"This is a remarkable step in the protection of Southern Resident Orca and the recovery of Puget Sound," stated Stephanie Buffum Field, Executive Director of Friends of the San Juans and one of the ESA listing co-petitioners.

In December 2002, a coalition of environmental groups filed suit in federal district court in Seattle challenging the National Marine Fisheries Service's decision not to list Puget Sound orcas under the Endangered Species Act. The lawsuit was filed by Earthjustice and the Center for Biological Diversity on behalf of the Center, Ocean Advocates, Orca Conservancy, Friends of the San Juans, People for Puget Sound, former Secretary of State Ralph Munro, Karen Munro, and Earth Island Institute. The lawsuit contended that once the agency determined that this orca population is discrete and in danger of extinction, it had a legal duty to extend ESA protection to the whales. The agency acted illegally by superimposing its own value judgment and deciding that the Southern Residents are insignificant.

Here is NMFS' website that will have the listing:

<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Whales-Dolphins-Porpoise/Killer-Whales/ESA-Act-Status/Final-Listing-Determination.cfm>

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