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CITES 2004 **www.panda.org/species/CITES**

WWF FACTSHEET

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NORTHERN MINKE WHALES, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, and ANTARCTIC MINKE WHALES, *Balaenoptera bonaerensis*

I. Species Facts

Natural History and Distribution

The minke whale has been known by this name since the beginning of the 20th century. It is thought that a Norwegian whaler called Meincke, while on a whaling cruise, sighted a group of the small whales, not knowing that it was then a species considered too small to be worth the effort of killing. The crew thereafter jokingly referred to these animals as “Meincke’s whales”, and the name eventually caught on.

Up until the 1930s, the whaling industry remained uninterested in harvesting minke whales because their larger relatives, such as fin and blue whales, were plentiful and brought a higher profit per catch. However, when populations of the larger whales became seriously depleted, with several species being brought close to extinction by commercial whaling, attention turned to minkes. In 1949, Norway alone caught no fewer than 4000 of this species in the North Atlantic. By the time the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling was agreed in 1982, minkes were the most important species for whaling in both the North Atlantic and the Antarctic, where more than 115,000 were killed in the 20th Century. In recent years, minkes have also become the major target of Japan’s whaling operations in the North Pacific.

All whale scientists agree that there are at least two separate species of minke whales: the northern minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata)* in the Northern hemisphere, and the Antarctic minke whale *(Balaenoptera bonaerensis)* in the Southern Hemisphere. The minkes of the Southern Hemisphere are actually divided into two different subspecies, the Antarctic minke and the dwarf minke.

These mammals are cetaceans which belong to the *Mysticeti* suborder and the *Balaenopteridae* family (they have baleen plates and ventral grooves for feeding). Although the smallest of the baleen whales, they may still reach 10 metres (females usually being larger than males) and weigh up to 10 tonnes. They are distributed from the tropics to polar waters. This filter feeder's diet varies with location. In the Southern Hemisphere it mostly consists of krill (small shrimp-like animals), while in the Northern Hemisphere small fish (e.g. capelin, sand eel & sardines) are eaten as well as krill.

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Generally, minkes migrate between summer feeding grounds in polar waters and wintering grounds in warmer waters where calving takes place, but their migrations are variable from year to year and very little is known of their breeding or social structure, other than that the populations are segregated by sex and age. The calf spends 10 months in the womb and up to six months nursing. The young minke whale matures sexually after six to eight years and might live for up to 40 or 50 years, although adult mortality rates are relatively high (approximately 9-10% per annum).

Populations and threats

The accurate identification of a distinct population of cetaceans, in the sense of a stand-alone unit to be conserved, is critical to sound management. In recent years conservation and management considerations have often been confounded by the continually evolving understanding of the dynamics of cetacean population structure. In the absence of easily observed breeding behaviours, nesting beaches or haul-out sites, the best information on cetacean population structure increasingly comes from genetic analyses. Using this growing base of genetic data, scientists are finding that population separation for many species is greater than expected, with many populations smaller than traditionally believed. This changing view of population structure has important management and conservation implications for many cetacean species.

A great deal of scientific uncertainty exists regarding stock separation and population estimates of minke whales in the Northern Hemisphere. There are several separate populations of *B. acutorostrata*, in the Atlantic and in the Pacific, which do not mix. These populations have been depleted by whaling, and they are listed by IUCN (World Conservation Union) as Near Threatened. In 1999 the Scientific Committee of the IWC endorsed a population estimate of 25,000 animals for the Okhotsk Sea – West Pacific stock. In addition to whaling under Japan's scientific whaling programme, this stock is subject to a very high rate of bycatch in fishing nets on Japanese and Korean coasts (more than 200 animals annually, and increasing each year). It is also closely adjacent, with seasonal overlap in distribution, to the small, depleted Sea of Japan/Yellow Sea/East China Sea stock (also known as the "J" stock), which has been estimated at fewer than 1,000 animals. Scientists in the IWC have raised concerns about minke whale stock structure in the North Pacific, based on data indicating that more than one offshore stock (or population) exists.

The Northeast Atlantic stock of minkes was most recently estimated by the IWC to be between 80,000 and 112,000 animals, and the North Atlantic Central stock at about 93,000. No currently accepted population estimate exists for Southern Hemisphere minkes. A previous IWC estimate of 760,000 was recently rejected, and new estimates range as low as 300,000.

Despite the IWC's moratorium on commercial whaling, minke whales are hunted by three countries, which exploit loopholes in the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. Norway hunts Northern minkes in the NE Atlantic, the North Sea, and the Barents sea under their objection to the moratorium, setting its own quotas. Iceland also hunts minkes in the North Atlantic under a "scientific whaling" programme. Japan catches minkes for "scientific research" within the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary and in the western North Pacific, regardless of repeated requests by the IWC to refrain from doing so. At the most recent meeting of the IWC in 2004, Japan proposed increasing its minke whale kill in the Southern Hemisphere from 440 to almost 3000 annually. The number of minkes hunted each year (outside of the IWC system) is now rising steadily, reaching a total of 1,273 in the year 2003..

At present, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) protects all species of great whales, including minke whales, from international trade under their Appendix I listing. However, the whaling countries have been engaged in persistent attempts to re-open trade. These efforts failed at the last two meetings of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, in 2000 and again in 2002.

Minke whales, like other marine mammals, also face long term and more insidious threats, including marine pollution. Certain bio-accumulative toxic chemicals may reach minke whales via the food chain and be passed on to their offspring. They can eventually lead to immuno-suppression, cancers and reproductive failure. Pollution also increases the risk of contamination of cetacean populations by pathogens. In addition, non-biodegradable products, such as plastic debris, can cause death by ingestion.

Furthermore, human activities have led to habitat degradation, especially by altering the physical and chemical characteristics of breeding or feeding grounds, particularly near coasts. Noise, caused by intense ship traffic and seismic testing, is a disturbance likely to affect minkes because whales largely depend on their hearing for navigation and communication. Interaction with fisheries is another hazard, both from entanglement in fishing gear and the decline of some of the species whales feed upon, due to over-exploitation by man. Other more global threats include climate change, which may result in a shift in ocean currents and a reduction in Antarctic krill, as well as ozone depletion, which may reduce marine productivity in polar regions.

IWC, CITES and minke whales

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) has prohibited commercial whaling of all great whale species, including both species of minkes, since its moratorium on commercial whaling came into force in 1986. In addition, the entire Indian Ocean and the entire Southern Ocean around Antarctica are IWC whale sanctuaries where all whaling is prohibited. However, as noted above, Japan, Norway, and Iceland currently conduct whaling on minkes in both hemispheres.

CITES protects all species of great whales, including minkes, from international trade under its Appendix I listing.
However, Japan, Norway and Iceland all hold reservations to the Appendix I listing of minke whales, meaning they are able to trade in this species without technically contravening the Convention.

WWF solutions

WWF is calling on Japan and Iceland to cease their programmes of "scientific" research whaling, given that tested, reliable, non lethal alternatives exist to the research conducted by these countries. WWF considers there to be no scientific or any other justification for by-passing the IWC's moratorium on all commercial whaling. WWF also calls on Norway to adhere to the most precautionary approaches in calculating their own quotas under their objection to the moratorium. Please also see WWF's paper **Japanese Scientific Whaling: Irresponsible Science, Irresponsible Whaling** www.panda.org/species/iwc.

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WWF projects

WWF has an ambitious programme for endangered whale species and populations, including reducing threats to whales through field research, training and capacity building, and by securing improved national and international action and agreements. A detailed summary of all WWF projects can be found at www.panda.org/species; projects include:

- promoting the establishment of whale sanctuaries and marine protected areas;
- developing, analysing and promoting mitigation measures to reduce cetacean bycatch;
- studying how contaminants affect whales;
- supporting the development of conservation plans and management policies for whale populations;
- providing support to whale watching programmes.

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