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Scientists Identify the “Unknowns” about the Harbor Porpoises in the Salish Sea

Statement issued by leading marine mammal scientists and wildlife managers pinpoints critical research and conservation needs for the harbor porpoise

SEATTLE, WASH., March 8, 2013 – Washington and British Columbia’s leading marine mammal scientists and wildlife managers agree: a traditional stock assessment for harbor porpoise for the Salish Sea is past due and needs to be conducted.

The harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is the most frequently sighted cetacean species in the Salish Sea, but important aspects of its ecology are still unknown and other data are out of date.

“Pacific Biodiversity Institute initiated our harbor porpoise research in 2007. We soon realized that some key elements of the harbor porpoise’s story were missing,” said Aileen Jeffries, principal investigator for Pacific Biodiversity Institute’s Harbor Porpoise Project. “Without that baseline data, it’s nearly impossible to talk about trends.”

This group statement comes on the heels of a workshop convened in Anacortes on February 7 when Pacific Biodiversity Institute, Cascadia Research Collective and the SeaDoc Society brought a “think tank” of researchers from Washington and British Columbia together to determine the state of knowledge of this species.

A current stock assessment – needed to learn and track the current harbor porpoise population size in the inland waters, for both Washington and British Columbia – emerged as this group’s top priority. Anecdotal information suggests that harbor porpoise may have increased in Puget Sound, or have shifted their distribution back to Puget Sound relative to earlier decades, but, without a formal survey, the scientists couldn’t say if this was really is the case. The last survey occurred in 2002-03, when a population of 10,680 porpoises was estimated for the Washington’s inland waters.

Puget Sound Ecosystem Monitoring Program (PSEMP) coordinator Nathalie Hamel said PSEMP is “gratified to see gaps in our knowledge of the ecology of Puget Sound harbor porpoise being addressed through a scientific review and workshop.”

Fishery entanglement also emerged as a potential concern for harbor porpoise in the Salish Sea. The researchers are asking federal, state, and provincial agencies to work collaboratively and urgently on this important issue and have offered to assist in this process.

Participants agreed to collaborate on data collection where possible and debated the appropriateness and potential benefits of various research methods, including new acoustic technologies.

Pacific Biodiversity Institute (PBI) has pioneered the use of a new research tool called the C-Pod for studying the porpoise in the Puget Sound. The C-Pod is an acoustical device that records harbor porpoise vocalizations and it could be a useful aid in the population assessment. PBI, Cascadia Research and Dr. Jason Wood, University of Washington, are hoping to calibrate the C-Pods that they each have deployed in order to enable an estimation of population trends over a large area. According to Jeffries, “New methods must come to the fore because the health of our harbor porpoise population can tell us a great deal about the health of the Salish Sea.”

As Hamel noted, “The workshop objectives aligned very well with PSEMP objectives. We’ll be building on the findings and recommendations that have come out of this workshop, and look forward to the future programs that will contribute meaningful information on the status of harbor porpoise and other marine life in Puget Sound.”

The full “**Statement on Salish Sea Inland Waters Harbor Porpoise Research and Management Needs**” is available on any of the workshop organizers’ websites.

Harbor Porpoises Natural History and Conservation Issues

Harbor porpoises are found throughout the temperate coastal waters of the Northern Hemisphere. As their name suggests, they are commonly seen in harbors and bays, preferring shallow water less than 500 feet deep. They have also been known to frequent inland waters, including rivers, estuaries, and tidal channels.

Harbor porpoises feed primarily on fish and are among the smallest of the cetaceans, reaching an average size of about 5 feet and 120 pounds. They can dive deep, more than 655 feet, but usually stay near the surface, coming up regularly to breathe. They make a distinctive puffing noise that resembles a sneeze.

In the Salish Sea, harbor porpoises face a number of threats including death due to by-catch in net fisheries, pollution, underwater noise, depleted stocks of forage fish and habitat loss.

About the Workshop Organizers

The Workshop on Harbor Porpoise Research was organized by Pacific Biodiversity Institute, SeaDoc Society and Cascadia Research Collective.

Pacific Biodiversity Institute conducts scientific research in the fields of ecology, conservation biology, and natural resource management. PBI is a non-profit organization dedicated to using the best available science to conserve biodiversity. <http://www.pacificbio.org>

Cascadia Research Collective is a non-profit research and education organization based in Washington State focusing on marine mammal studies. They were founded in 1979 primarily to conduct research needed to manage and protect threatened marine mammals. <http://www.cascadiaresearch.org/>

The SeaDoc Society is a marine science program of the University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine focused on issues of ecosystem and wildlife health of the Inland Waters of Washington and British Columbia. <http://www.seadocsociety.org/>

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Images available for press use

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Caption: Harbor porpoises are found throughout the Salish Sea. We could learn more about the health of this ecosystem if more monitoring and research was devoted to this species. Credit: Florian Graner, Sea Life Productions.



Caption: Photographer Florian Graner captured this harbor porpoise image while studying the species in Norway. He presented on porpoise behavior at Salish Sea Harbor Porpoise workshop held in February in Anacortes, Washington. Credit: Florian Graner, SeaLife Productions.



Caption: Leading marine biologists met at Pacific Biodiversity Institute's research site in Anacortes in February to develop a set of recommendations for the most needed research on the harbor porpoise. Research Biologist John Calambokidis of Cascadia Research Collective (pictured above) gave the opening presentation. Credit: Photo by Lace Thornberg, Pacific Biodiversity Institute



Caption: Knowledge about the habitat needs, population trends, life cycle, genetics, behavior and role in the ecosystem of this shy marine mammal remains surprisingly scarce. Credit: Florian Graner, SeaLife Productions.