

The western gray whale – a conservation priority

Business has joined forces with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) to better understand the biology of and threats to western gray whales. The purpose of this broad engagement is to do everything possible to ensure the survival and recovery of this population

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The western Pacific population of gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) is one of only two surviving populations of this species in the world. Both populations were brought near to extinction by commercial whaling. The eastern Pacific population, which migrates annually between Mexico and Alaska/northeastern Siberia, has recovered substantially and now numbers about 20,000 individuals. By comparison, the western Pacific population, or western gray whale, which migrates between eastern Russia and China, is estimated at about 120 individuals, with only 25-35 reproductive females.



The western gray whale is listed as *Critically Endangered* on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. The International Whaling Commission prohibits the deliberate killing of these whales and has urged its members to make every effort to minimize accidental deaths and disturbance to the population and its habitat.

A population under threat

The few surviving animals face a number of hazards throughout their range, including collisions with ships, underwater noise, entanglement in fishing gear and changes to their feeding grounds. Particular concerns have been raised about the potential impact of offshore oil and gas activities along the coast of Sakhalin Island, Eastern Russia.

Sakhalin oil & gas development activities

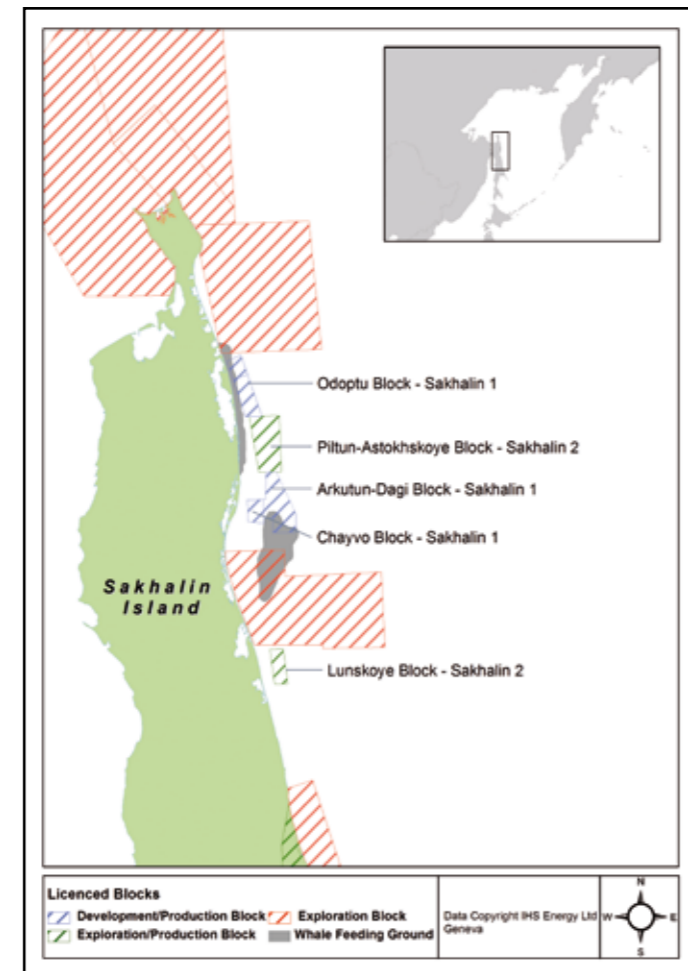
The waters off Sakhalin Island are the only known feeding grounds for this population. Gray whales feed for about half of the year, in the summer and autumn, and build stores of fat to provide energy during the calving and mating season. The primary feeding grounds are therefore of major importance for the health and survival of the population.

The area around Sakhalin Island is also rich in oil and gas deposits, which have been explored and exploited since the mid 1990s. The area has been divided into nine different development blocks, three of which are currently under active development or production. One of these, the *Sakhalin II* oil and gas development, is in close proximity to the gray whale feeding areas. The *Sakhalin II* development, being undertaken by Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd. (Sakhalin Energy), a consortium consisting of Gazprom, Shell, Mitsui and Mitsubishi, has a predicted operational lifecycle of over 40 years. Its potential impact on the survival and recovery of western gray whales is therefore of great interest and concern.

Significant risks posed by fishing gear

Between 2005 and the beginning of 2007, four western gray whales – all females and including one mother and her calf – are known to have died off the coast of Japan, after becoming trapped in fixed fishing gear. According to a population projection prepared by IUCN's Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel, this rate of loss of females will, if continued, lead to extinction of the population with high probability.

These events and the threats faced by the whales throughout their range show that broad engagement is needed if the whale population is to survive and recover.



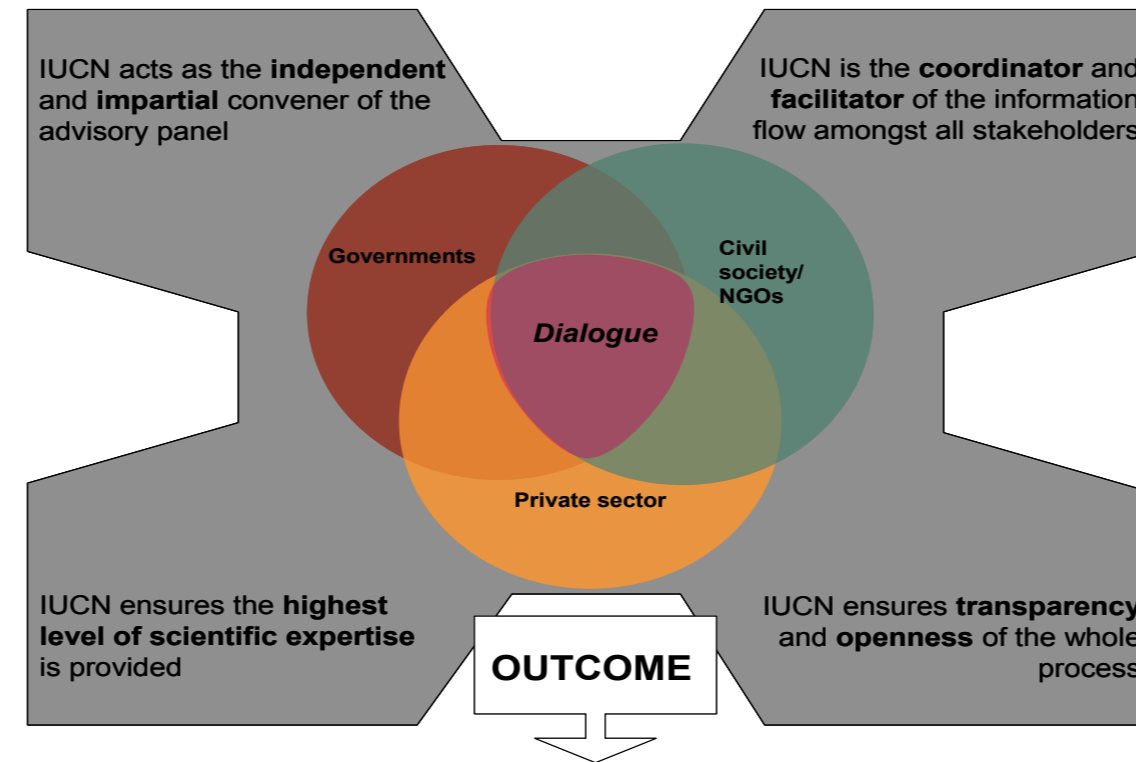
Net-Work for the Conservation of western gray whales

IUCN has been concerned about the conservation of western gray whales for many years. Through its Species Survival Commission (SSC), IUCN collaborated with a joint Russia-USA research project launched in the mid-1990s to investigate the conservation status, behavior, distribution of and threats to the whales. This project was the main source of information for the listing of the western gray whale population on IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species™.

IUCN is also closely involved in the discussions on western gray whales by the International Whaling Commission, and sends an official observer to the meetings of the Scientific Committee each year. These connections ensure that synergy is achieved and that the work of the two organizations is both coordinated and complementary.

Since 2004, IUCN has worked with Sakhalin Energy in order to provide advice and recommendations on how the company can minimize risks associated with oil and gas development to the whales and their habitat. As a major part of this broad initiative, in 2006 IUCN created the Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel, a panel of independent scientists that provides scientific advice and recommendations on the company's operational plans and mitigation measures.

The advisory panel provides an important mechanism for the exchange of information and opinions among various stakeholders, and most importantly, for scientifically rigorous, independent assessment. Moreover, it provides a useful model of how business, scientists and the conservation community can work constructively and non-confrontationally to address environmental threats.



Conservation actions based on open, structured dialogue amongst parties

Where to from here?

IUCN's engagement with Sakhalin Energy is a positive development for the conservation of this critically endangered population. However, any comprehensive conservation initiative must consider the full range of threats. For this reason, IUCN aims to broaden the scope of its efforts from the current focus on Sakhalin Island to encompass, eventually, the entire geographic range of the population.

IUCN also aims to engage with all major stakeholders throughout the population's range and to enable scientists to bring their expertise forward in helping address the variety of threats facing western gray whales. These efforts will also foster understanding of the population's status and the whales biology, as major uncertainties remain.

The main roles of the advisory panel are:

- To focus on the **conservation** of western gray whales and related biodiversity
- To **assess** the status of the western gray whale population
- To provide **advice and recommendations** regarding research on the whales
- To **review** Sakhalin Energy's plans and assessments, and the effectiveness of the mitigation measures proposed or implemented
- To provide independent **scientific and technical advice** to decision makers, governments and civil society concerning conservation of western gray whales and related biodiversity
- To **coordinate research efforts** on western gray whales and their habitat
- To increase **global knowledge** and understanding of western gray whales and their habitat



What has been achieved so far?

Since the beginning of IUCN's engagement with Sakhalin Energy in 2004, a number of outcomes have been achieved, including:

- Sakhalin Energy revised its operations and construction plans to reduce the risks to the whales. In particular, the company decided to re-route underwater pipelines to avoid feeding areas, a decision requiring 180km of additional pipeline;
- Researchers working for oil companies and independent scientists have agreed to share certain kinds of scientific data. A key example is an effort to standardize and cross-verify photo-identification databases;
- A more robust scientific monitoring program has been integrated by Sakhalin Energy into their operational cycle;
- A globally authoritative and credible mechanism has been established linking independent scientists, the private sector, governments, financial institutions and NGOs. This has resulted in greater transparency, more opportunities for dialogue across cultural and institutional boundaries, and improved understanding of the whale population's status (numbers, trends, threats etc.).

The example of the western gray whale highlights how IUCN can mobilize its extensive network of scientists and technical experts to address serious environmental challenges. Engagement with the private sector is key to achieving environmentally sustainable and socially responsible development. Companies have started identifying business opportunities in ecosystem conservation, rehabilitation and restoration, and are developing solutions to help conserve ecosystems while creating new market opportunities.

IUCN has a growing track record of successful engagement with the private sector. Examples of its work with the private sector beyond Sakhalin include:

- A Cooperation Agreement with Holcim – one of the world's leading building materials companies – to develop robust ecosystem conservation standards for the Holcim Group. This comprises the creation of an Independent Standing Expert Panel to provide scientific and quality assurance support in select areas of Holcim activities;

- An ongoing dialogue with the International Council on Mining and Metals to improve the biodiversity performance of mining companies and provide a platform for dialogue on related issues such as indigenous peoples concerns and legacy sites;
- A growing relationship with Royal Dutch Shell which has involved the secondment of an IUCN staff member to Shell and of a Shell employee to IUCN. This has been instrumental to the project on the western gray whales as well as the development of a Business and Biodiversity Facility concept for promoting markets for ecosystem services;
- Developing and promoting the concept of "biodiversity offset" as a tool for businesses to mitigate the residual impacts of operations after all mitigation options have been fully exploited.



About the IUCN

Created in 1948, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) brings together 83 States, 110 government agencies, 800 plus NGOs, and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries in a unique worldwide partnership. The Union's mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

The Union is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. The Union is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1,000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.

More information can be found at www.iucn.org



Saving western gray whales

Business and conservationists join forces for a common goal



Further information

www.iucn.org/themes/marine/sakhalin

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