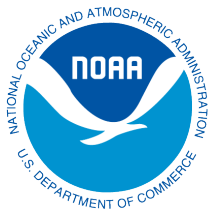


# Reporting Stranded Beluga Whales in Cook Inlet, Alaska



Photo credit Paul Wade, NOAA Fisheries



**NOAA**  
**FISHERIES**

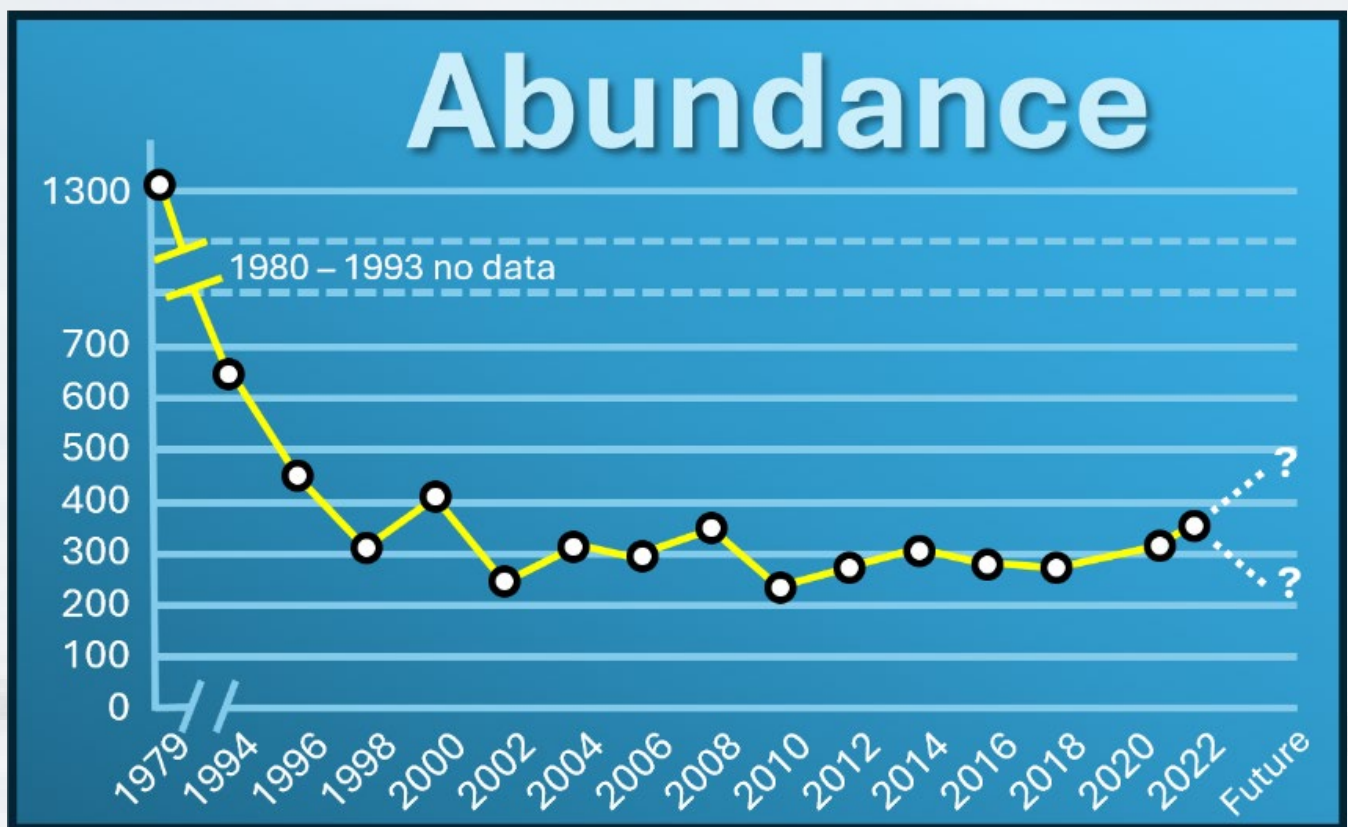
Updated 2024



This training discusses the status, potential threats, and proper reporting for stranded Cook Inlet beluga whales. It was designed for local pilots flying in Cook Inlet. The training was created by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Funding was provided by the US Fish and Wildlife Service C-State Wildlife Grant and in-kind support was provided by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

# Who are the Cook Inlet Beluga?

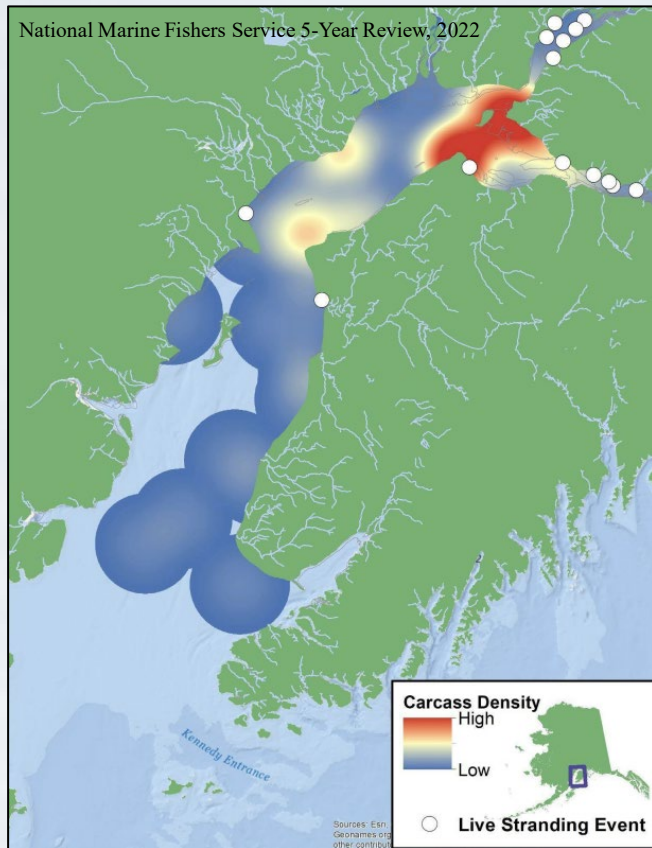
- The Cook Inlet beluga (CIB) are an isolated population in Alaska. They are genetically distinct, do not mix with other populations, and live in Cook Inlet year-round.
- The number of individuals in the CIB population was around 1,300 but fell rapidly between 1994 and 1998.



- A voluntary pause on beluga harvesting began in 1999, and the last Cook Inlet beluga was harvested in 2005.

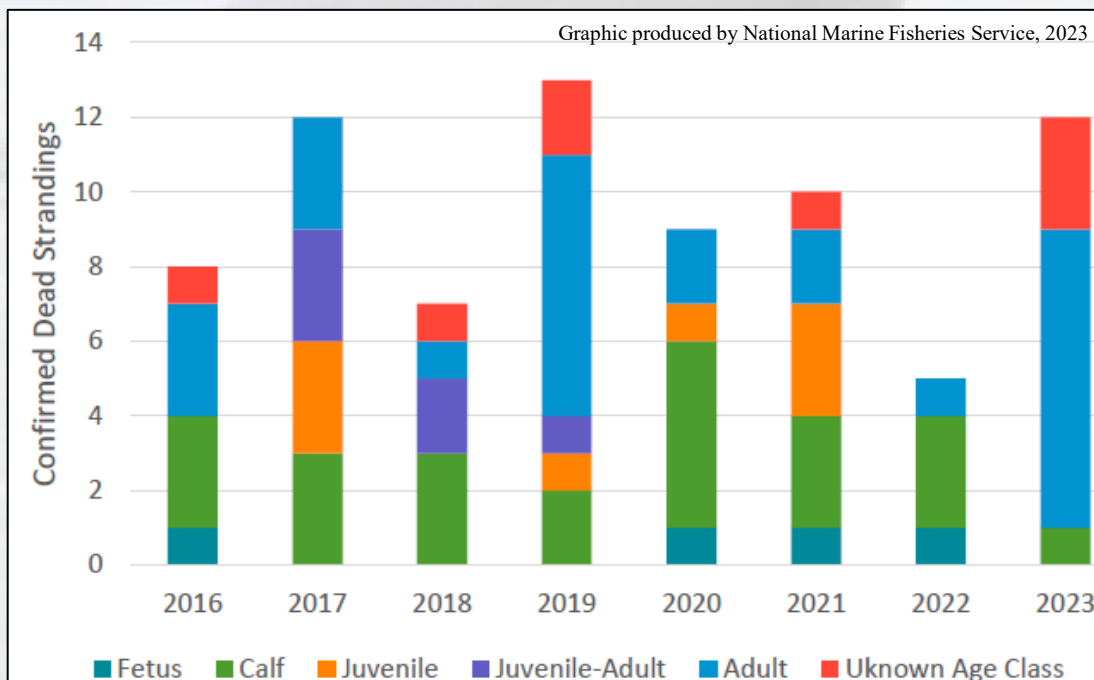
Nearly 20 years later, the population remains around **350 individuals.**

# Stranded Animals and Research



Live stranding event locations (white circles) and kernel density (color coded) for dead-stranded Cook Inlet beluga whales reported from 2009 to 2021.

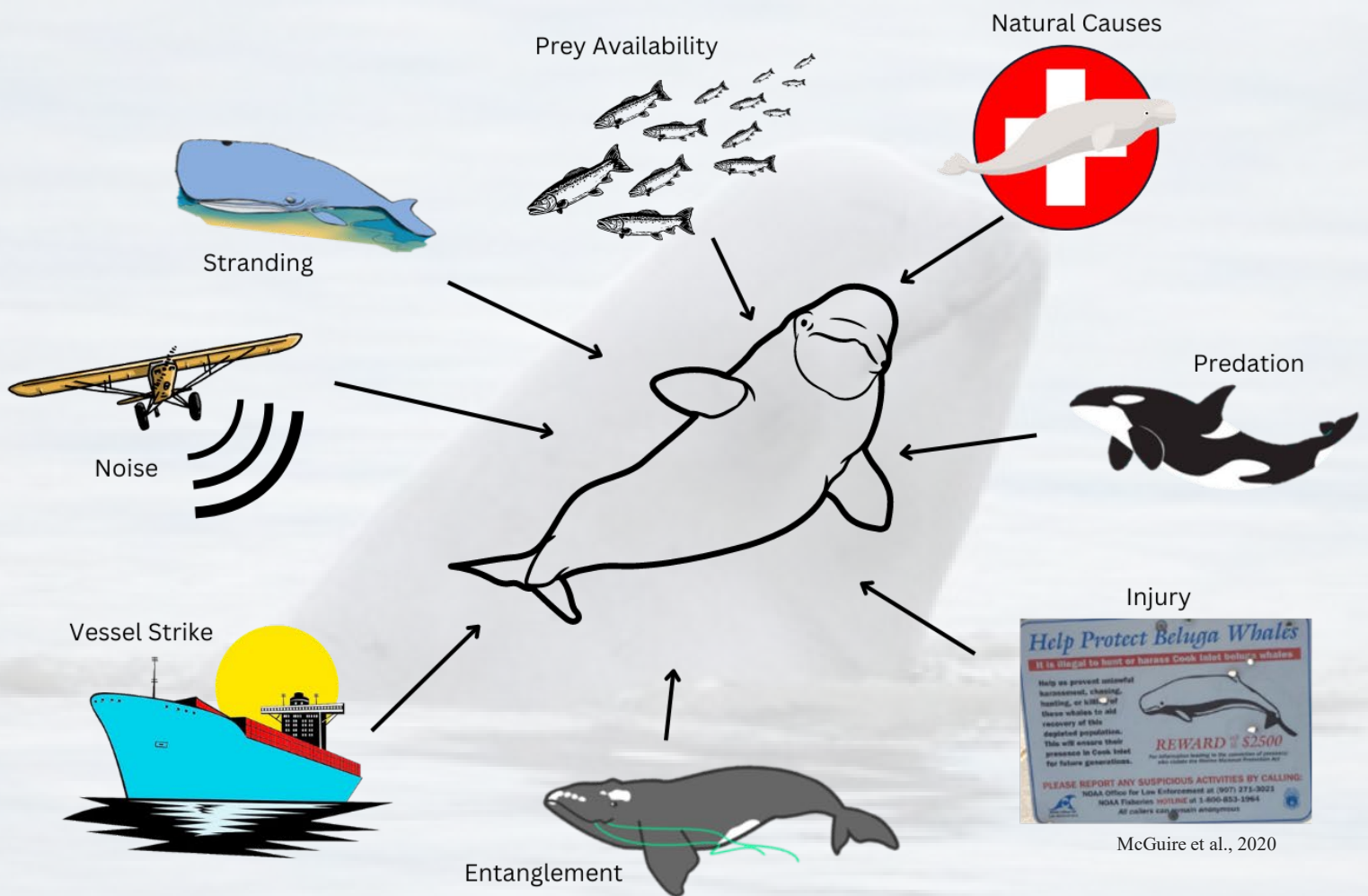
- When animals succumb to stressors, they may become ‘stranded.’ A live animal may strand if it is entangled or in need of medical attention.
- CIB have live-stranded in Cook Inlet during low tide and were able to refloat and swim away with the returning tide.
- Studying dead-stranded animals reveals an individual’s diet, age, sex, history of illness, contaminant load, and even parentage. Tissues degrade quickly, so prompt reporting is important to allow trained Stranding Network members to respond.



There were 76 dead-stranded and 35 live-stranded CIB in the last eight years.

# What Impacts CIB?

There are likely a combination of factors that affect the Cook Inlet beluga population.



McGuire et al., 2020

# Live-Stranded CIB

**Entangled** – May be carrying man-made objects such as fishing gear, rope, plastic bags, rubber or plastic strips, or other marine debris.



**Injured** – May see visible wounds on the animal, with red and pink tissue indicating fresh injuries and white/gray tissue indicating healed injuries. Not all injuries break the skin.



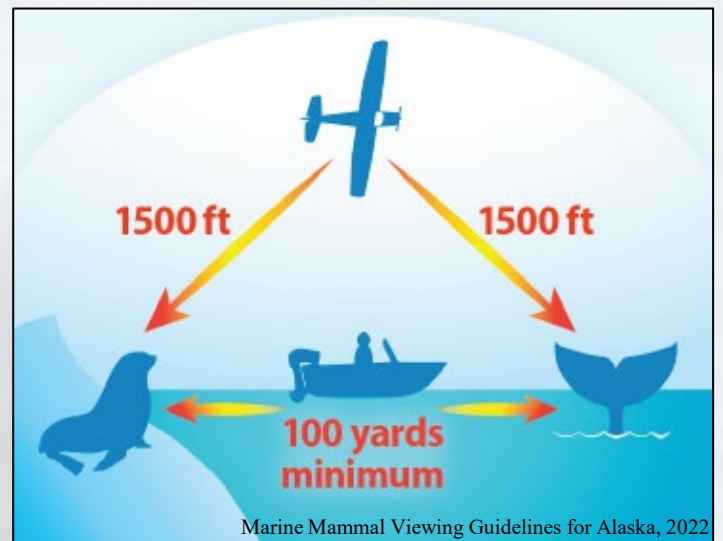
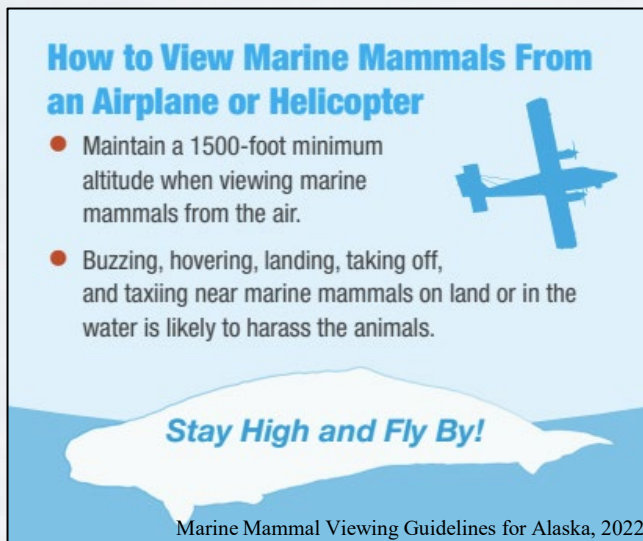
**Distressed** – May show erratic swimming or splashing at the surface, or listless floating without reactions to humans. CIB may become distressed and live-strand during low tides.



Mass Stranding Events happen when animals strand together.

# Why Can't I Approach Live CIB?

- All marine mammals, including CIB, are protected from Harassment. This includes close approaches and loud noises, even for stranded animals.
- It is illegal to fly within 1500 feet of live marine mammals. Additionally:
  - Do not circle if possible
  - Limit encounters to 30 minutes
  - Avoid changes in noise or altitude around marine mammals, such as buzzing, landing or taking off, or high-power maneuvers.



- It is not advised to operate drones (UAS) around live marine mammals
- Do not approach within 100 yards of live marine mammals from land or water

As of 2024, the maximum **penalty for violators** may include:

- Civil penalties up to \$34,457
- One year of prison time, plus criminal fines
- Forfeiture of the vessel involved, including penalties up to \$25,000

The best way to help stranded animals is the 24-hour Stranding Hotline

**877-925-7773**

# Dead-Stranded CIB

- You are permitted to approach dead-stranded marine mammals, but do not move or collect anything from the animal unless explicitly asked to do so by the Stranding Network.



- Dead-stranded animals may be seen floating or cast upon a beach. The Stranding Network may ask you to secure a carcass if it is at risk of drifting away.
- This animal was seen four days apart. The condition of the carcass severely limits what information can be collected, so prompt reporting is key!



Only authorized personnel may collect parts from animals listed as Threatened or Endangered, including CIB. Questions about regulations can be addressed by the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (1-800-853-1964):

[Protected Species Parts](#)

Find the complete listing of prohibited species here:

[Endangered, Threatened, or Candidate Species](#)

# Information to Collect

- The Stranding Network relies heavily on community reports of stranded beluga and other marine mammals within Cook Inlet.
- The following is most helpful when reporting a stranding [877-925-7773](tel:877-925-7773):
  - Date and time of observation
  - Species or type of animal
  - Number of animals
  - State of stranded animal (Alive or dead, entangled, distressed, trapped, or injured)
  - General location or lat/long
  - Age class if known, or estimated length and color. CIB are gray at birth and gradually become white as adults.



- For deceased animals:
  - Sex. If female, is there a calf around?
  - Degree of decomposition (descriptors such as white, pink, gray, yellow, skin sluffing, scavenged, or bones are useful descriptors)
  - Multiple photos of the full body and any identifying features
  - Size with reference for scale (shoes work!)



# Stages of Decomposition



Freshly dead  
with muscle integrity, no discoloration, and no bloating

Moderate  
with bloating,  
reduced muscle integrity,  
scavenging, and  
somewhat smelly



Advanced  
with skin sluffing, no muscle or organ integrity, and very smelly

Severe  
with mummified or skeletal remains



**Never** put yourself or your property at risk. Carcasses can carry diseases that are contagious to humans (zoonotic) or pets. Hotline reports of any stranded marine mammal are welcomed by the Stranding Network.

# What Could You Say?

## Animal A 2022236

Date and time of sighting: May 3, 2022. 09:30

Species/type of animal: Beluga

Number of animals: 1

State of animals: Dead, beachcast

Location or lat/log: Pt Possession, left of beach access point

Age class or color: Gray-white, smaller than I usually see, possibly sub-adult

Size: Approx. 10 feet long

Sex: N/A

Level of decomposition: Severe

Photos taken: Yes

Additional notes: Severely decomposed with heavy scavenging and no organs remaining

Contact Information: Alice Thomas, (907) 448-2927



Photo courtesy of National Marine Fisheries Service

# What Could You Say?

## Animal B 2023296

Date and time of sighting: April 18, 2023. 3:30pm

Species/type of animal: Beluga

Number of animals: 1

State of animals: Dead, beachcast

Location or lat/log: 61.222276, -150.823221

Age class or color: White, no gray. Looks full grown.

Size: Approximately 2 of my height, which is 6'3'.

Sex: Male, can see underside

Level of decomposition: Mild-to-moderate

Photos taken: Yes

Additional notes: Bird scavenging but not bloated. Beach only accessible by boat or chopper.

Contact Information: Brian McManus, Alaskan Chopper Charters, (907) 990-8144, McManus@ACC.com



Photo courtesy of National Marine Fisheries Service

# What Could You Say?

## Mass Stranding

Date and time of sighting: August 7, 2021. 14:45

Species/type of animal: Beluga

Number of animals: 20-30

State of animals: Live-stranded in Knick Arm mud flats

Location or lat/log: Near Goose Bay-Point Mackenzie Airport

Age class or color: All ages, ranging from dark gray  
small whales to big all white whales

Size: Ranging from 5-15 ft

Sex: N/A

Level of decomposition: N/A

Photos taken: Yes

Additional notes: Most are dry on the mud flats. Location  
is approximate.

Contact Information: C/MSgt Elliot Tucker, (907) 577-2202



National Marine Fishers Service 5-Year Review, 2022

# The Perfect Photo

While all information is helpful, photos of the following features tell the Stranding Network the most about the animal:

- The entire whale
- The dorsal ridge and sides (how belugas are identified!)



- Details of marks with scale for reference (ruler, coin, pencil, hand, boot, etc.)



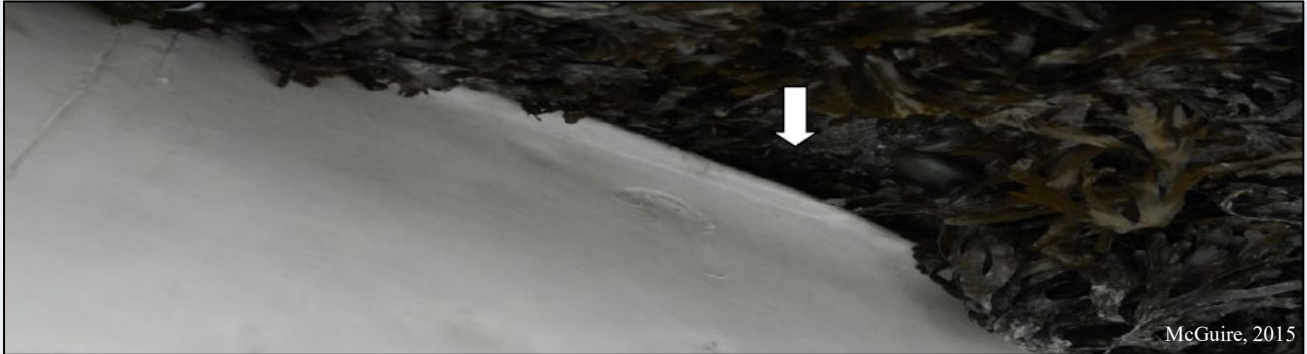
- Abdomen to determine sex. **Do not** move the animal if underside is not visible.



- Photos to show body location and orientation
- Date and time-stamped, your name for photo credit

# Photo Aspects to Avoid

- Glared photos
- Low resolution or insufficient contrast



- “Floating” closeups without reference
- Obstructions like mud, blood, or vegetation. Can rinse with water to clear obstructions.



- Angled photos
- No reference for scale

Sometimes photos or a scale reference are not possible.

**It is still worthwhile to report these strandings!**

**877-925-7773**

# Thank You, Pilots!

The Cook Inlet beluga whale faces many challenges, and its recovery remains uncertain. With the assistance of aerial stranding reports from community volunteers, we can send responders quickly to collect as much data as possible. We appreciate your commitment to this invaluable piece of Cook Inlet's history, for our generation and those to come.



Photo credit Paul Wade, NOAA Fisheries



Please follow the QR code below to take a **short quiz** on the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website.



The first 500 pilots who complete the quiz will receive a **free flight suit patch** to commemorate your training!

# Additional Resources

## Resources:

About beluga whales

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/beluga-whale>

ADF&G Chinook Salmon Research Initiative

<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=chinookinitiative.main>

NMFS Alaska Marine Mammal Viewing Guidelines and Regulations

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/marine-life-viewing-guidelines/alaska-marine-mammal-viewing-guidelines-and-regulations>

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/insight/viewing-marine-life>

Endangered, Threatened, and Candidate Species in Alaska

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/endangered-species-conservation/endangered-threatened-and-candidate-species-alaska>

Collecting Protected Species Parts

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/protected-species-parts>

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Photo-ID Project

<https://www.cookinletbelugas.com/>

ADF&G Resources for reporting dead or distressed marine mammals

<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=distressedwildlife.marinedistressed>

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