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Scientists To Step Up Research Efforts on Harbor Porpoises in the Salish Sea

Workshop organized by Pacific Biodiversity Institute, SeaDoc Society and Cascadia Research Collective pinpoints critical research and conservation needs for the harbor porpoise

ANACORTES, WASH., February 7, 2013 – Leading scientists and wildlife managers met in Anacortes today to identify critical research and conservation issues related to the harbor porpoise.

Although the harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is the most abundant and widely dispersed cetacean species in the Salish Sea, not enough is known about its habitat needs, distribution, population trends, life cycle, genetics, behavior and role in this ecosystem.

“PBI proposed this workshop because we are keen to see all of the scientists in the region collaborating. Our goal was to further communication,” said Aileen Jeffries, research scientist with Pacific Biodiversity Institute. Jeffries has pioneered the use of passive acoustic monitors for studying the porpoise in the Puget Sound. As she noted, “The health of our harbor porpoise population can tell us a great deal about the health of the Salish Sea. New methods of monitoring this species must begin to play a larger role.”

By affording researchers from the United States and Canada with a unique opportunity to meet face-to-face, the result of the workshop was a rich trans-boundary exchange of information. After reviewing the data currently being collected by researchers in both countries, workshop participants identified gaps in the research—places where additional data could most enhance our understanding of the harbor porpoise.

Research biologist John Calambokidis opened the workshop with an overview of harbor porpoise research. The organization he heads, Cascadia Research Collective, has studied harbor porpoise abundance, distribution, pollutant levels, and strandings in Washington’s waters for decades. CRC researchers discussed the some of the recent changes in sightings and stranding they have seen as well as the causes of mortality.

Following additional presentations from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the Vancouver Aquarium and others, the workshop’s attendees launched into a discussion centered on identifying stressors and research needs. Participants agreed to collaborate towards enhancing data collection in order to close knowledge gaps.

According to Calambokidis, “harbor porpoise have proven highly vulnerable to human activities and had even apparently been eliminated for many decades from portions of Puget Sound and there have been major gaps in our understanding of these animals. This workshop represents a key first step in uniting scientists interested in this species in how best to address these gaps and better manage and protect this vulnerable species.”

Participants agreed on several priority areas for research and conservation actions in the Salish Sea, where a large diversity of marine mammals including whale and dolphin species, as well as the harbor porpoise, are found.

As Joe Gaydos, chief scientist for The SeaDoc Society and one of the workshop organizers, concluded, “Harbor porpoises are definitely understudied and underappreciated in the Salish Sea. It was exciting to get this Washington-British Columbian think tank together to look more closely at this species.”

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 with a distinctive puffing noise that resembles a sneeze.

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

About the Workshop Organizers

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.

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.

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.

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Terminology:

cetaceans -- members of an order (Cetacea) of aquatic mostly marine mammals that includes the whales, dolphins, porpoises, and related forms and that have a torpedo-shaped nearly hairless body, paddle-shaped forelimbs but no hind limbs, one or two nares opening externally at the top of the head, and a horizontally flattened tail used for locomotion; small whales, porpoises and dolphins

strandings – times when marine mammals come ashore alive under abnormal circumstances, are injured close to shore, or wash ashore dead, whether individually or in groups

Images available for press use



Caption: Harbor porpoises are found throughout the Salish Sea and may be able to tell us more about the health of this ecosystem if more monitoring and research was devoted to the species. Credit: Photo by Peter Morrison.



Caption: Knowledge about the habitat needs, population trends, life cycle, genetics, behavior and role in the ecosystem of this shy marine mammal remains scarce. Credit: Photo by Peter Morrison.

For larger, hi-res versions, contact: Lace Thornberg, lace@pacificbio.org, 206.484.6210