

THE SOUTHERN RESIDENT KILLER WHALE COMMUNITY OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST A POLICY ANALYSIS FOR CONSERVATION

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Abstract

The southern resident killer whale population of Washington State and British Columbia has declined by 20% over the last five years. This decline has resulted in interest in increasing protection for this population. A policy analysis was undertaken to evaluate three levels of conservation approaches for the southern resident killer whale population. The major goals defined for analysis of a southern resident killer whale conservation policy were: 1) recovery of the stock, 2) equitable consideration for stakeholders, and 3) administrative feasibility. Detailed criteria were used to evaluate each policy approach in relation to how well a given approach may meet the defined goals. Analysis indicated that the status quo of Federal protection under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and local conservation actions in San Juan County have potential for expansion. A second alternative, a more complex federal policy with management under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), has the potential to increase funding, support, and enforcement of protection and conservation actions. However, a review of the unique aspects of the southern residents indicates that the population may not clearly qualify as a distinct population segment (DPS), which would be necessary for an ESA listing. Although an ESA listing is a strong conservation tool, a listing does not guarantee success and should not be seen as the only answer for addressing this population's decline. A third alternative, a regional policy directed by the Northwest Straits Commission and the county Marine Resource Committees that make up the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, would be beneficial in expanding existing conservation efforts on a larger regional scale. Given the amount of time an ESA listing may take and the uncertainty of the population's DPS qualification, analysis indicates a more immediate approach under a coordinated regional policy is the better alternative at this time.

POSSIBLE CAUSES FOR DECLINE

- Reduced Availability of Prey - Salmon decline and potential nutritional stress
- Contaminants (PCBs) - Depressed immune response and reproductive problems
- Stress - Surface and noise disturbance from increased vessel traffic

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

- Status Quo - Local county efforts and management under the MMPA
- Regional Policy - The NW Straits Marine Conservation Initiative (NWSMCI) and 7 County Marine Resource Committees (MRC)
- Federal Policy - Management under the ESA

Policy Analysis Goals Criteria Matrix

LOW: (one point) inadequate/ineffective, MODERATE: (two points) somewhat effective, HIGH: (three points) aggressive/more effective.

GOALS	CRITERIA	Status Quo: Mixed Policy	Regional Policy	Federal Policy: ESA
Address possible causes for decline	Salmon	LOW	MODERATE	HIGH
	Pollution	LOW	MODERATE	MODERATE
	Stresses	MODERATE	HIGH	MODERATE
	Catastrophic events	LOW	MODERATE	MODERATE
Equity to Stakeholders	Local community	HIGH	HIGH	LOW
	Whale Watching Industry	HIGH	HIGH	LOW
	Other user groups	MODERATE	HIGH	LOW
Administrative Feasibility	Effectiveness of enforcement	LOW	LOW	MODERATE
	Flexibility and Adaptation	HIGH	HIGH	MODERATE
	Ease of Implementation	MODERATE	MODERATE	MODERATE
	Integration and Coordination of efforts	LOW	HIGH	HIGH
Total Points		20/33	27/33	21/33

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Initiate Regional resolution under NWSMCI - immediately outline existing projects
- Status Review under the MMPA as Depleted
- Determine what actions can be done to address decline and habitat protection under MMPA
- Involvement of Canadian agencies and interest groups
- Continue studies and monitoring of impacts from vessel traffic especially recreational traffic
- Identify critical habitat areas for further protection
- Increase public awareness campaign and funding for conservation programs

CONCLUSIONS

- It may be difficult to get an ESA listing
-No guarantee of success
- There may be potential mechanisms under the MMPA
-Increasing habitat protection, closer monitoring of whale watching impacts
- Existing NWSMCI resolution may help clarify key issues already being addressed
- Increasing public awareness and involvement will be critical in gaining support for increased protection and conservation