

Anchorage Daily News

February 22, 2005

Unique genes set right whales apart NEW: Those in Alaska are a separate species.

By DOUG O'HARRA
Anchorage Daily News

The critically endangered North Pacific right whales that forage in the Bering Sea each summer may be even more unique than scientists previously thought.

Using sophisticated genetic tests, scientists have confirmed that the whales have much different DNA than right whales in the Atlantic or southern oceans and definitely qualify as their own species, according to researchers at the Wildlife Conservation Society and the American Museum of Natural History.

The Alaska population, considered the rarest large cetaceans on the planet, were thought extinct until the mid-1990s when biologists began encountering a small number of the whales each summer in the same general area outside Bristol Bay. A few hundred more may remain near Russia.

Scientists are now using satellite tracking tags to find where the Alaska whales go during winter. Last fall, the conservation group Center for Biological Diversity filed suit to force the federal government to protect their summering grounds as critical habitat.

that biologists used two types of genetic material -- DNA from the nucleus and DNA from a structure called the mitochondria -- to verify a new species among the great whales.

"In 2001, we compared mitochondrial DNA samples from individual whales from different ocean basins and found that the North Pacific right whales merited their own species name," said Howard Rosenbaum. "Our recent analysis using both mitochondrial and nuclear DNA has produced even stronger support."

Until the 1990s, right whales in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans were considered to be the same endangered species.

The new tests marked the first time