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Walrus on Endangered Species Waiting List

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Updated The Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the Pacific walrus, greatly recovered from decades of slaughter but facing stress in the warming Arctic climate, merits protection under the Endangered Species Act.

But the species, like others that face rising pressure but are not in imminent danger, will for now remain in the regulatory equivalent of an overcrowded hospital triage department. The Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the petition that resulted in the agency decision, calls the “warranted but precluded” species status given to the walrus and many other species a “black hole.”

The walrus’s situation will be reviewed annually, according to the wildlife service. Here’s background from the agency:

Status Review of the Pacific Walrus Questions and Answers

On a related front, a new paper in the journal Nature Communications (available in full online) projects deep reductions in litter size in the polar bear population along the western shores of Hudson Bay, should the open-water season continue to lengthen as foreseen under the warming influence of accumulating



The photograph above was taken by John Sarvis/USFWS.

greenhouse gases. Bears in other parts of the Arctic with similar ice patterns could face equal peril, according to the paper. I’ve queried the authors about some details in the analysis and will file more on that research when I can.

For walruses, here’s where things stood when biologists and filmmakers from a wildlife group spotted vast herds crowded onshore in areas where the marine mammals typically rest on ice floes (as I reported, this coastal crowding is not an unprecedented phenomenon):

From the Archives, Oct. 2, 2009 The established icons of Arctic climate change are the polar bear and, to a lesser extent, those indigenous communities that are trying to

maintain traditional ways in the face of slushy floes and the relentless erosion of coasts exposed to waves as sea ice retreats.

Now comes the Pacific walrus. The giant clam-digging marine mammal, greatly recovered from enormous hunting pressure, appears to be facing rising climate-related stresses as the sea ice that it normally relies on as a haven and nursery has stayed far from the coasts on the Russian and American sides of the Bering Strait and Chukchi Sea. I have an article running in The Times describing the latest analysis of recent stampeding episodes of walruses crowded onshore in the absence of ice.