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Climate change blamed as thousands of walrus die in stampedes

By DAN JOLING

The Associated Press



ANATOLY A. KOCHNEV / AP

This photo provided by Pacific Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography shows a dead walrus, foreground, after a stampede on Cape Vankarem, Russia in March, 2007.



ANATOLY A. KOCHNEV / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Thousands of Pacific walrus above the Arctic Circle died in stampedes earlier this year after the disappearance of sea ice caused them to crowd onto the shoreline in extraordinary numbers.

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — In what some scientists see as another alarming consequence of global warming, thousands of Pacific walrus above the Arctic Circle were killed in stampedes earlier this year after the disappearance of sea ice caused them to crowd onto the shoreline in extraordinary numbers.

The deaths took place during the late summer and fall on the Russian side of the Bering Strait, which separates Alaska from Russia.

"It was a pretty sobering year — tough on walrus," said Joel Garlach-Miller, a walrus expert for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Unlike seals, walrus cannot swim indefinitely. The giant, tusked mammals typically clamber onto the sea ice to rest, or haul themselves onto land for just a few weeks at a time.

But ice disappeared in the Chukchi Sea this year because of warm summer weather, ocean currents and persistent eastern winds, Garlach-Miller said.

As a result, walrus came ashore earlier and stayed longer, congregating in extremely high numbers, with herds as big as 40,000 at Point Shmidt, a spot that had not been used by walrus as a "haulout" for a century, scientists said.

Walrus are vulnerable to stampedes when they gather in such large numbers. The appearance of a polar bear, a hunter or a low-flying airplane can send them rushing to the water.

Sure enough, scientists received reports of hundreds and hundreds of walrus dead of internal injuries suffered in stampedes. Many of the youngest and weakest animals, mostly calves born in the spring, were crushed.

Biologist Anatoly Kochnev of Russia's Pacific Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography estimated 3,000 to 4,000 walrus out of population of perhaps 200,000 died, or two or three times the usual number on shoreline haulouts.

He said the animals only started appearing on shore for extended periods in the late 1990s, after the sea ice receded.

"The reason is the global warming," Kochnev said.

The reports match predictions of what might happen to walrus if the ice receded, said wildlife biologist Tony Fischbach of the U.S. Geological Survey.

"We were surprised that this was happening so soon, and we were surprised at the magnitude of the report," he said.

Scientists said the death of so many walrus — particularly calves — is alarming in itself. But if the trend continues, and walrus no longer have summer sea ice from which to dive for clams and snails, they could strip coastal areas of food, and that could reduce their numbers even further.

No large-scale walrus die-offs were seen in Alaska during the same period, apparently because the animals congregated in smaller groups on the American side of the Bering Strait, with the biggest known herd at about 2,500.

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