

Southern resident orcas added to state's endangered species list

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Oregon's Fish and Wildlife Commission has added a group of whales that forage along the Oregon Coast to the state's endangered species list.

The commissioners voted unanimously to list southern resident orcas as endangered during its Friday meeting in Hillsboro. The vote followed a presentation by a fish and wildlife official calling for the animals to be listed and testimony from dozens of conservationists, biologists, teachers, anglers and residents, some of whom had traveled hundreds of miles.

Much of the testimony was fact-based and articulate, and one woman burst out in tears over the orcas' plight. There was also insightful and moving testimony from seven students from Sunnyside Environmental School, a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school in southeast Portland.

"These orcas are at their lowest numbers in 30 years and because of the conditions they are in, 75% of orca pregnancies fail, on top of the 42% of calves that don't survive. This further proves their need for protection" a 7th grader said. "When I grow up to be an adult, I want to be able to visit the San Juan Islands as I do now and see a pod of healthy and thriving orcas."

“The southern resident whales are very intelligent creatures, and there’s so much we have to learn from them,” a 6th grader added. “For example, each pod of whales has its own unique dialect.”

The designation means Fish and Wildlife Department officials will have to try to help the orcas, such as by boosting declining salmon populations, but that could require more funding, said John North, a department Marine expert.

At least half of the Chinook salmon consumed by the orcas in the ocean originate in the Columbia Basin, according to Brady Bradshaw, an oceans campaign manager for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity.

The department also will coordinate with state agencies to address other threats to orcas along the coast in a forthcoming management plan. They are harmed by chemical and oil spills and sounds and other disturbances from boats. The Center for Biological Diversity is advocating that the state establish mandatory and voluntary distances boats must keep from whales.

“Noise interference is a huge issue when they’re trying to find prey, and it’s already scarce,” Bradshaw said.

Southern resident orcas have been struggling for decades to find food and navigate increasing boat traffic and pollution, according to an assessment presented to the commission by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in September.

North, a marine expert for the fish and wildlife department, pointed out at the hearing that orcas do not have any natural predators but are dying nevertheless from malnutrition, disease and problems reproducing. They suffer from inbreeding and miscarriages, with a high number of females not producing a calf yet, North said.

Decline over past two decades

In the late 1990s, nearly 100 southern resident orcas plied the Pacific. That dropped to 88 when they were listed under the Endangered Species Act. Today, just 74 are left. Officials from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s fisheries division project the number could decline by as much as half during the next 20 years. The animals, also known as southern resident killer whales, are already listed as endangered by Washington and Canada, where they forage off the coast.

Southern resident orcas are one of three subspecies of killer whales in the Northwest, and their range spans southeastern Alaska to central California. The Oregon Coast is an important habitat for the orcas as they navigate between Cape Meares and the California border, moving among feeding grounds.

In the 1960s and ’70s, they were captured and brought to large aquariums globally. Their population sizes have varied since then, with a peak of 98 in 1995, and declining ever since. When the animals were federally listed in 2005, there were 88 left.

Such a small population can lead to inbreeding and other reproductive issues, which have become more prevalent, according to the state’s biological assessment.

Last February, the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife and Whale and Dolphin Conservation filed a petition to list the southern resident orcas in Oregon. That gave the commission a year to decide.

Oregon Capital Chronicle Editor-in-Chief Lynne Terry contributed to this story.

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