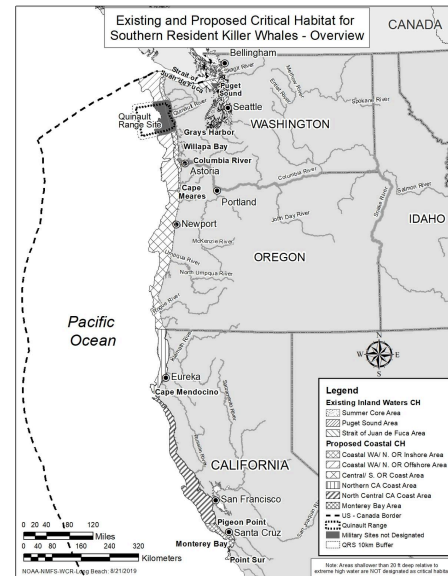


At Sea: New protections for orcas

September 21, 2019



The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is proposing to expand critical habitat for the Southern Resident orca whales over 15,626 square miles in the Pacific Ocean along the West Coast.

The proposal

The proposal would extend critical habitat for the whales along a roughly 1,000-mile swath of West Coast waters between the depths of 6.1 meters (20 feet) and 200 meters (about 650 feet). It would stretch from Cape Flattery, Washington, south to Point Sur, California, just south of Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay.

NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region Public Affairs Officer Michael Milstein said the expansion proposal comes after court action.

“The Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition with us to update the critical habitat designation, and later sued NOAA Fisheries,” Milstein said. “This is a settlement agreement in which we agreed to do so.”

Despite reports that the designation could lead to a host of new restrictions affecting fishing, vessel movements, aquaculture and military activities, Milstein said the agency does not expect new restrictions due to the designation expansion.

“Critical habitat is a designation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that defines areas important to species listed under the ESA, but it applies only to federal agencies and actions,” he said. “It requires federal agencies proposing actions that may affect critical habitat to consult with us (NOAA Fisheries) for our recommendations as to how to avoid damaging or destroying the critical habitat. Activities that are not funded, authorized or carried out by a federal agency would not be affected.”

Milstein said NOAA also does not expect practical change from the expansion because the agency already considers the Southern Resident killer whales in reviewing federal actions in areas the whales use.

“We already consider the whales in assessing the impacts of the operations of dams on the Columbia River, because we know that they prey on salmon from that river system,” he said.

History

According to a report from NOAA Fisheries posted at the agency’s online site, in 2006, NOAA Fisheries designated critical habitat for the killer whales in the inland waters of Puget Sound and the Salish Sea, where the whales typically spend much of the year.

At the time, there was not enough information to support extending the critical habitat to the outer coast. Since then, satellite tracking, acoustic monitoring and sightings data have confirmed that two of the three Southern Resident pods regularly range south along the West Coast as far as the Central California Coast during winter. The third pod, J Pod, typically remains further north, either in inland waters or off the west side of Vancouver Island.

The NOAA website post said research supporting the critical habitat proposal includes new details of the Chinook salmon stocks and other species. Southern Residents prey on them during winter off the West Coast. Most of the Chinook the whales were documented eating came from the Columbia River Basin. This includes spring Chinook from the lower Columbia, fall salmon from the middle Columbia, and spring/summer Chinook from the upper Columbia.

The whales mainly preyed on Chinook salmon. They also consumed halibut, lingcod, steelhead, chum, skate and northern anchovy at times.

Loss of salmon

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reports one reason for the decline of the killer whales is the loss of salmon.

“Salmon have declined because of land alteration throughout the Pacific Northwest associated with agriculture, timber harvest practices, the construction of dams, urbanization, fishery harvest practices, and hatchery operations. Many of the salmon populations that were once abundant historically have declined to the point where they have been listed as endangered or threatened with extinction,” according to the NMFS release.

Next step

According to Milstein, on Thursday, Sept. 19, a 90-day comment period was triggered on the whale habitat expansion proposal, which will end in December.

“We will then consider the public comments and make a final decision on what areas should be designated as critical habitat,” Milstein said.

The Triplicate is closely monitoring this developing story. Follow updates in the Wednesday and Saturday editions, and here online.