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Consideration of cetacean subspecies to assess for the IUCN Red List

IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group Red List Authority

The IUCN Red List criteria can be used to assess the status of species, subspecies and ‘subpopulations’ – the last of these are the equivalent of ‘populations’ in common parlance. The Specialist Groups formally are required to assess only at the species level. The Cetacean Specialist Group (CSG) uses taxonomy agreed by the [Society for Marine Mammalogy’s Taxonomy Committee](#). Scientific evidence has led, in some cases, to similar whales in different ocean basins being considered separate species (for example, North Atlantic Right Whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) and North Pacific Right Whales (*Eubalaena japonica*) and, in other cases, to similar whales in those same ocean basins, often in the northern and southern hemispheres, being recognized as separate subspecies (for example, Fin Whale and Humpback Whales). Taxonomic uncertainty remains for some other whales that are currently separated in a similar fashion.

Red List assessments are to be updated at least every ten years. IUCN expects Specialist Groups to keep in mind that assessments are meant to facilitate conservation planning and action. For many cetaceans, planning and action are best pursued at the subpopulation, or sometimes subspecies, level because the species-level distribution is geographically broad and ecologically variable. Given the nature of cetacean biology, distribution and threats, the Cetacean Specialist Group has decided to prioritize future assessments below the species level primarily on the basis of which populations are likely to warrant listing as CR, EN or VU. Here we provide a brief rationale as to why some cetacean subspecies have not been and are not planned to be assessed. This was based on the [guidelines for selecting cetacean subspecies and subpopulations](#) for assessment developed by the CSG. As a general rule, where a subspecies would be assessed as LC or in the same threatened category as the species, or where there is considerable taxonomic uncertainty, it was not deemed necessary to conduct a specific subspecies assessment at this time.

Large whale subspecies

Species: *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. The Common Minke Whale is assessed as LC.

Balaenoptera acutorostrata acutorostrata The nominate subspecies (the North Atlantic Minke Whale) would also be LC because population reduction in the past by whaling is understood and is clearly reversible, reduction has ceased, and a reduced abundance of => 50% over three generations (criterion A1 for VU) is not suspected, inferred or projected.

Balaenoptera acutorostrata scammoni This subspecies (the North Pacific Minke Whale) is expected to also be LC because population reduction in the past by whaling is understood, clearly reversible and reduction has ceased and is not expected to have reduced abundance by => 50% (criterion A1 for VU). However, at least one subpopulation (known as J-stock) that was hunted commercially but is now taken mainly as ‘bycatch’ in Japanese and Korean waters should be assessed as it likely warrants a threatened category.

Species: *Balaenoptera borealis*. The Sei Whale is assessed as EN but a pending reassessment is expected to result in downlisting to VU.



Balaenoptera borealis borealis The Northern Sei Whale is found in both the North Atlantic and North Pacific. As seems to be the case for most other large whales, the Sei Whales in these two basins likely constitute different subspecies. No serious immediate threat to the Sei Whale population in either basin is known, therefore this subspecies does not warrant assessment at this time.

Balaenoptera borealis schlegelii The Southern Sei Whale was the more numerous of the two currently recognized subspecies and the species-level assessment is most heavily influenced by trends in Sei Whale abundance in the Southern Hemisphere. The species assessment in 2018 indicated that Sei Whales should be downlisted from EN to VU but a Red List rule requiring that such downlisting can occur only after a 5-year delay meant that the species must continue to be listed as EN. Once the species has been re-assessed (as VU), this subspecies should be assessed according to the process developed to consider assessments for threatened subspecies and subpopulations.

Species: *Balaenoptera edeni* The Bryde's Whale is assessed as LC.

Balaenoptera edeni brydei The Bryde's Whale subspecies is not yet assessed separately. But it has a large pelagic distribution and is relatively common with few threats. Thus, it is likely to also be LC because population reduction in the past by whaling is understood and is clearly reversible, reduction has ceased, and a reduced abundance of => 50% over three generations (criterion A1 for VU) is not suspected, inferred or projected.

Balaenoptera edeni edeni The Eden's Whale is found in warm coastal waters of the northern Indian Ocean and western North Pacific. There are numerous apparently disjunct subpopulations, some of which may prove to be separate subspecies or even species. Taxonomic resolution is likely to take considerable time. The subspecies is likely to be LC, but some of the small subpopulations should likely be assessed without waiting for taxonomic clarity. One of these is the subpopulation in the East China Sea that was extensively hunted in Japanese waters.

Species: *Balaenoptera musculus* The Blue Whale is assessed as EN.

The EN listing of the species (and by implication the nominal subspecies, *B. m. musculus*) is largely based on the depletion of what was once the most abundant subspecies (the Antarctic Blue Whale, *B. m. intermedia*). The other currently recognized subspecies, *B. m. indica* and *B. m. brevicauda*, both have taxonomic uncertainty that will likely take considerable time to resolve. However, in the meantime subpopulations could be delineated and some of them (e.g. the Chilean population of Blue Whales) would likely warrant assessment.

Species: *Balaenoptera physalus* The Fin Whale is assessed as VU.

The VU listing (and by implication the nominal subspecies, *B. p. physalus*) is largely based on depletion of what was once the most abundant subspecies (the Southern Fin Whale, *B. p. quoyi*). The North Atlantic Fin Whale (*B. p. physalus*) is subject to ongoing whaling and was assessed by the International Whaling Commission's Scientific Committee as being probably above 60% of its unexploited level. As such, a separate assessment of the North Atlantic subspecies using IUCN criteria may be warranted because the category assigned would likely differ from that of the species.



The Southern Fin Whale (*B. p. quoyi*), if assessed separately, presumably would be assigned to the same category as the full species and does not merit a separate assessment.

Balaenoptera physalus velifera The North Pacific Fin Whale has had decades of positive trends in abundance in the eastern North Pacific. However, the western North Pacific had extensive whaling by Japan and the USSR and trends in abundance are less well known. Nevertheless, as a subspecies it is expected to be LC because population reduction in the past by whaling is understood, clearly reversible and reduction has ceased. It is not expected to have reduced abundance by => 50% (criterion A1 for VU). However, at least one subpopulation (East China Sea) experienced greater depletion by past whaling and on-going threats that may warrant assessment.

Species: *Megaptera novaeangliae* The Humpback Whale is listed as LC.

All three recognized subspecies (Southern Humpback Whale: *M. n. australis*, North Pacific Humpback Whale: *M. n. kuzira*, North Atlantic Humpback Whale: *M. n. novaeangliae*) have recovered strongly from whaling and are expected to also be LC because population reduction in the past by whaling is understood and clearly reversible, and reduction has ceased and is not expected to have reduced abundance by => 50% (criterion A1 for VU). The resident Arabian Sea subpopulation is listed as EN. Some subpopulations, for example populations listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act that use the southernmost breeding areas of both the eastern and the western North Pacific basin, experienced greater depletion, are subject to on-going threats (i.e. ship strikes and bycatch), and may merit assessment.

Table 1 - Baleen whale subspecies that may warrant assessment for the IUCN Red List. Note that within this document text subpopulations within the subspecies that may warrant assessment are identified.

Species	Species Category	Subspecies	Need for Assessment for Red List
<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	LC	<i>B. a. acutorostrata</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. a. scammoni</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>	EN	<i>B. b. borealis</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. b. schlegelii</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>	LC	<i>B. e. brydei</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. e. edeni</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	EN	<i>B. m. musculus</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. m. intermedia</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. m. indica</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. m. breviceauda</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	VU	<i>B. p. quoyi</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>B. p. physalus</i>	Consider Assessment
		<i>B. p. velifera</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	LC	<i>M. n. novaeangliae</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>M. n. australis</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time
		<i>M. n. kuzira</i>	Does not warrant assessment at this time