SC/13/WWG/7

ATLANTIC WALRUSES OF THE WESTERN RUSSIAN ARCTIC

Boltunov A.N. and Belikov S.E.
All-Russian Research Institute for Nature Conservation, Moscow, Russia

This paper focuses on the Atlantic walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus*) inhabiting Russian waters. Recent publications, unpublished materials and some papers that were not used in the previous NAMMCO work on this subspecies (Born et al. 1995) have been analyzed to update its status. Unpublished data on the distribution have been derived mostly from materials collected by multiyear aerial reconnaissance of sea ice (ARSI) performed on regular base in Soviet (Russian) Arctic from 1950s to 1990s (Belikov and Boltunov 2002).

GENERAL DISTRIBUTION

According to Heptner et al. (Гептнер и др. 1976) three walrus subspecies are represented in the Russian Arctic: the Atlantic walrus, the Laptev walrus (*O.r. laptevi*) and the Pacific walrus (*O.r. divergens*). It is generally accepted that in Russian waters the Atlantic walrus range covers the Barents and Kara seas. However the ARSI observations allow assuming that eastern limit of the range expands to northwestern part of the Laptev Sea (fig. 2).

Historically walruses were common in the White Sea. In 11-12th centuries walrus were hunted in the Onezhskiy Bay of the sea and their total extinction in the Mezenskiy Bay of the White Sea is dated to the second half of the 19th century (Тихоненко 1986). In 1980s in spring walruses regularly appeared in the Funnel of the White Sea (Тихоненко 1986). According to anecdotal data recent 15-20 years character of the walrus appearance in the White Sea has been the same.

ARSI observed walruses in the Arctic Basin in late summer - early autumn (fig. 2).

WINTER DISTRIBUTION

Southeastern Barents Sea is well-known winter habitat of walruses. This is supported by ARSI data (fig. 3) and by vessel-based observations in May-April 1993-1999 (Лыхин и Воронцов 1999) and in February 2000 (Горяев и Воронцов 2000). Solitary animals or small groups (2-7) were usually met on ice floes in areas with depth less than 70 m covered by broken ice or continuous grey-white young ice or near vast lanes. In February 1993 138 walruses (including 21 "mother-calf" pairs) were sighted near northeastern Kanin peninsula and in western part of the Pechora Sea (Haug and Nilssen 1995). Comparatively large groups of walruses (up to 130 animals) were observed in the southeastern Barents Sea in winter season in 1970s (Белоребрюшкин и Тихоненко 1974, Лухин 1978). Scarce observations of solitary walruses near western shore of the Novaya Zemlya,southern island 1948-1950 were reported by Vanderpeak (1998). Usually animals were seen at the fast ice edge near the western entrance to the Matochkin Shar Strait. The only group of 12 walruses was observed in the end of March, 1948.

There is a common opinion that in Russian Arctic Atlantic walruses spend winter only in the Barents Sea and mostly in its southeastern part (Гептнер и др. 1976, Минеев и др. 1989, Popov et al. 1990). However ARSI materials (fig. 3) and vessel-based observations (Лыхин и Воронцов 1999, Горяев и Воронцов 2000) prove that in winter walruses also stay in some parts of the Kara Sea. Moreover ARSI indicates that in winter northern Kara Sea with adjacent northwestern Laptev Sea host more walruses than other parts of the sea. Apparently walruses also stay near northernmost Novaya Zemlya, were authors also saw 2 animals on April 17, 1995.