

MONITORING ACTIVITIES BY INDEPENDENT GROUPS

Investigating Western Gray Whales Occurrence in the North-west of Sakhalin

Submitted by WWF-Russia

BACKGROUND

This paper presents an overview of a proposal to organize an expedition to the south-western Sakhalin to search for gray whales and investigate nearshore benthic communities in order to compare them with those on the opposite side of Sakhalin, in the Piltun Lagoon area.

The paper is submitted for the information of the panel in its consideration of future research activities and monitoring activities undertaken by independent groups.

Investigating western gray whales occurrence in the north-west of Sakhalin

Proposal for endorsement by the Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel

By Vassily Spiridonov (WWF Russia)

E-mail: vspiridonov@wwf.ru

The principal feeding area of critically endangered western Pacific gray whales in the coastal waters of north-eastern Sakhalin became recently a focus of numerous research and the major area of concern with regard to the ongoing offshore oil and gas development (Reeves et al., 2005). Outside of this area gray whales (from presumably the Western Pacific population) have been occasionally reported from the Magadan coast of the Sea of Okhotsk (Tauskaya Bay), northern Kuril Islands and Kronotsky Bay of East Kamchatka. Recently the photographs have to be taken from whales occurring off northern Kuril Islands and in the Kronotsky Bay. The former proved to belong to the Sakhalin summer population while the latter should be compared to the photo ID bank of the Sakhalin whales.

In 2005 the expedition on board R/V “Akademik Oparin” organized by the Institute of Marine Biology of the Far East Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences upon the contract with “Sakhalin Energy Investment Company” (SEIC) reported on the observations of gray whales from the Sakhalin Bay of the south-western Sakhalin. However, it remained unclear how regular is the occurrence of gray whales on the north-west coast of Sakhalin and if benthic communities in the nearshore areas of the Sakhalin Bay can support part of summering gray whale population. If part of the Sakhalin gray whale population is regularly feeding in the Sakhalin Bay it is highly relevant to the conservation of this species since this area falls over the shelf region licensed to Rosneft’ and BP for the offshore exploration and development.

We propose therefore to organize an expedition to the south-western Sakhalin which will, on one hand search for gray whales and, on the other hand, investigate nearshore benthic communities in order to compare them with those on the opposite side of Sakhalin, in the Piltun Lagoon area. The expedition will use as a platform of road vehicle capable to move along the beach of the spits separating Pomr’ and Baikal lagoons separating these areas from the sea and further north along the west coast of Schmidt Peninsula. Whale observations will be initially made using the vehicle survey census technique. In case of discovering whales observations using an electronic theodolite will be conducted to localize feeding whales. In the areas of whales feeding benthic studies using a zodiac boat, small dredges and grabs and, optionally, SCUBA diving equipment or portable ROV will be conducted to collect material for characterization of benthic habitats and communities. The timing of the expedition will be suited to the second half of August – early September when more appropriate weather in the north of Sakhalin will be expected.

The results obtained during the expedition will make possible (along with shipboard data likely to come from 2006 and 2007 SEIC programme) to assess the role of the Sakhalin Bay in maintaining the summer gray whale population and to plan conservation measures in the consultations with potential operators if offshore projects in the Schmidt Peninsula area.