

**NUMBERS, BEHAVIOR AND SEX-AGE STRUCTURE OF BELUGA WHALES SUMMERING IN TIGIL'SKY REGION OF THE WESTERN KAMCHATKA, FAR EAST RUSSIA**

**Tatiana Sergeevna Shulezhko (3), Boris Alexandrovich Solovyov (1), Denis Igorevich Ivanov (1), Fedor Vasilyevich Kazansky (2), Dmitry Mihailovich Glazov (1), Karina Karenovna Tarasyan (1), Vyacheslav Vladimirovich Rozhnov (4)**

- (1) Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution, RAS, Moscow, Russia; White Whale programm IPEE RUS
- (2) Kronotsky State Biosphere Reserve, Elizovo, Russia; White Whale programm IPEE RUS
- (3) Kamchatka Branch of the Pacific Geographical Institute, RAS, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Russia; White Whale programm IPEE RUS
- (4) Winogradsky Institute of Microbiology, RAS, Moscow, Russia; White Whale programm IPEE RUS

✉ T.Shulezhko@gmail.com

Here we present the first data on the biology of beluga whales summering in the estuary of Khairuzova and Belogolovaya rivers (Western Kamchatka). The research was conducted in the period of 30 July - 31 August, 2010. In total 342 hours of visual observations and 16 hours of acoustic records were obtained. During the onshore observations whales were encountered 551 times. Maximum number of belugas observed in the estuary at a time amounted to 250. The distribution of whales over the water area depended on the dynamics of salmon runs and water levels. In the period of active salmon run belugas were constantly present in the rivers and moved to the sea only during low water. Beluga whales of both sexes and all age categories including females with calves were encountered. We didn't notice any changes in the sex-age structure of the whale groups. Young animals and females with calves were present in the area through the whole research period. Belugas preferred the deepest parts of the estuary and used several certain feeding areas. The most common types of behavior of the whales were feeding and travelling, the rarest - resting and social behavior. Belugas used wide variety of the acoustic signals. The maximum acoustic activity was observed during social behavior, the minimum - during resting. In summer period the estuary is actively used by man for fishing. In spite of the heavy vessel traffic belugas didn't avoid busy areas and most of the places preferred by whales were located nearby the shipping routes. Fisherman poll showed that sometimes belugas take fish from the fisherman nets. In general the attitude of natives toward this species is neutral with a bit of curiosity. In spite of the availability of quota for belugas, no hunting occurs in the region.