

The Okhotsk Sea bowhead whale study. Fieldwork conducted by O. Shpak

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In summer 2011 and 2012, while conducting studies on the western Okhotsk Sea beluga whales, we also collected information and samples on bowheads present in the study area. Interview data on bowheads were also collected.

The study area was limited to Ulbansky Bay (#2 in the boxed part of Fig.1). The bowheads were present in the area from the beginning to the end of our work (early July-early September).

According to the interviews, they are first observed in Ulbansky Bay among ice in early May.

The highest number of observed bowheads was on September 2012, on a single-line platform-of-opportunity survey towards the exit of the Bay (51 whale, “naked-eye” survey). At the same day earlier we observed 9 whales (same or different individuals?). In summer 2011, we observed a similarly large group of whales in the middle part of Ulbansky Bay (43 individuals observed in a single 360°scan).

As for their distribution in the other Shantar region bays, the most often mentioned in literature places of summer concentration are Academy Bay (bays #1,2,3, but often only the wide northern part of the area including Konstantina Bay (#3) is called Academy Bay) and Tugursky Bay where intensive whaling was conducted in late 19th and mid 20th centuries.

Our observations 2009-2012 show that bowheads are also present in Nikolaya bay (#1, Fig.1) and Udskeya Gulf (#5, Fig.1). In Nikolaya Bay, we several times observed up to 13 whales in July 2009 and in August 2011; one whale was observed at the apical part of the bay. In Udskeya, the bowheads are seen throughout the summer (in numbers up to low teens, interview data) and stay there as late as early November (our data, opportunistic sighting).

Killer whale predation on bowheads is recorded in the Shantar region. From interview data, the captains of the gold mining fleet saw killer whales attacking a young bowhead at least three times; the last time – on September 1, 2012, northwestern coast of Udskeya gulf.

We often observed the scars on bowhead whale bodies that likely had been caused by killer whale teeth. In 2012, we have found a body of the bowhead whale (780cm in length) with a missing tongue and broken lower jaw (Fig. 3). The second body we found floating in the water. We estimated the length would be approx. 8.5m. From what we could see above the water, the body parts were intact, but there were the scars on the tail and sides (Fig. 4).

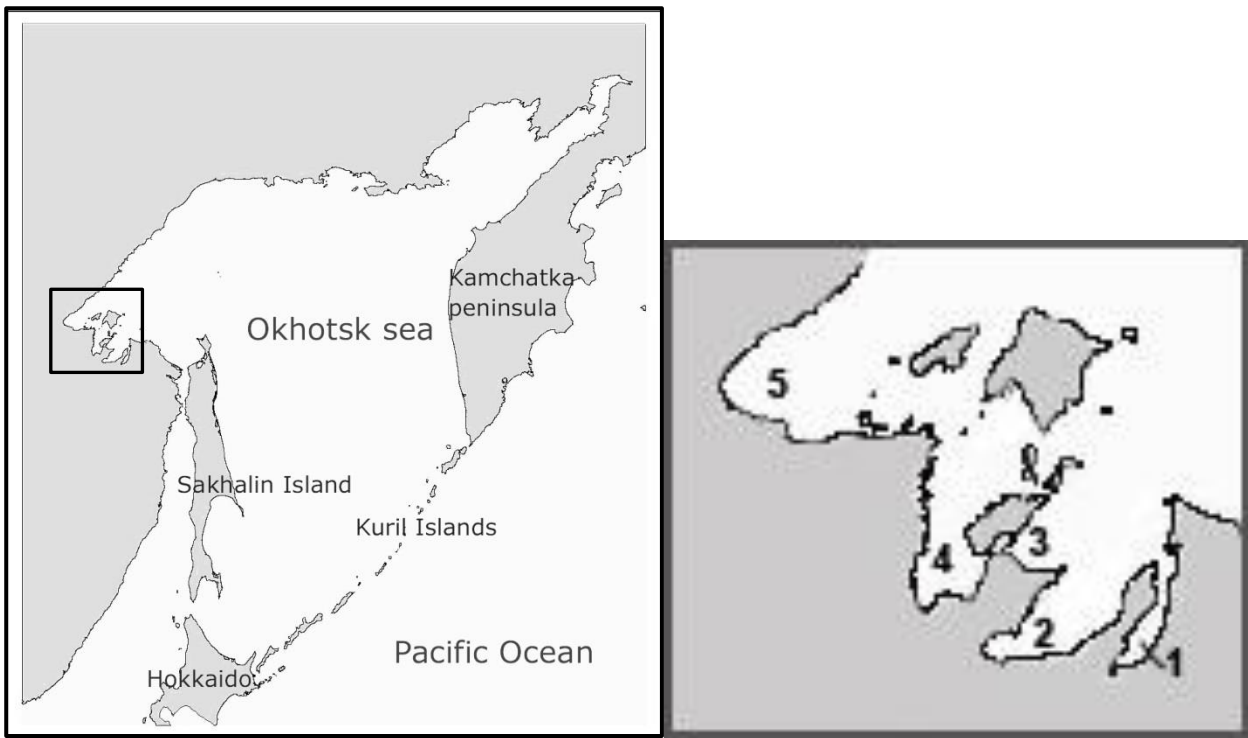


Figure 1. The Okhotsk Sea. The Shantar region is boxed. The Shantar Bays: 1 – Nikolaya, 2 – Ulbansky, 3 – Konstantina, 4 – Tugursky, 5 – Udskeya Gulf. The Bays 1,2,3 altogether form Academy Bay.

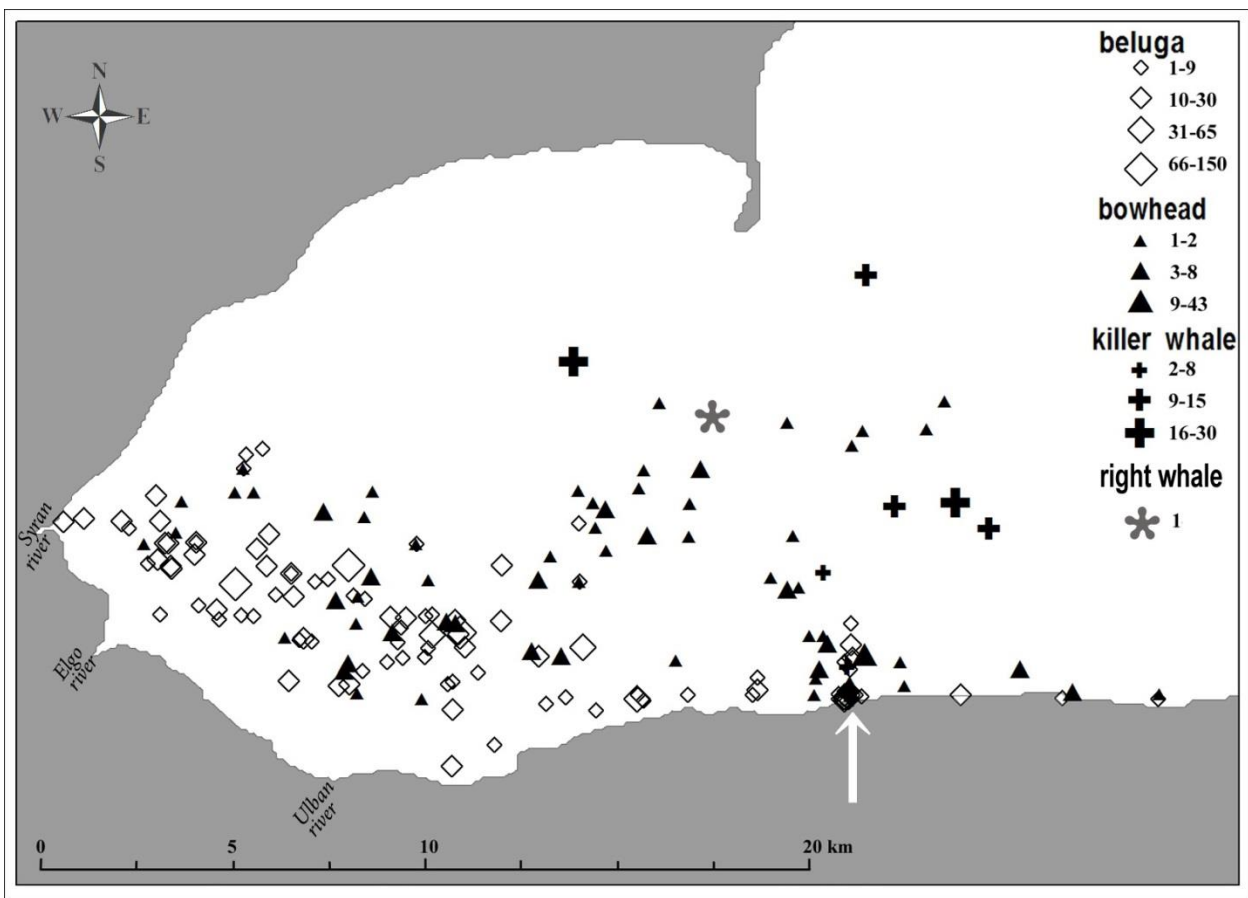


Figure 2. Whale sightings in summer 2011, Ulbansky Bay. (Shpak and Paramonov, 2012).



Figure 3. A dead bowhead found on July 29, 2012, Ulbansky Bay.



Figure 4. The scars on the bowhead body found on August 1, 2012, Ulbansky Bay.