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Singing the Blues

by Elisabeth Nadin

A recent study of acoustic signaling among blue whales in Antarctic waters is bringing hope to scientists who fear the plagued population of the world's largest mammals faces extinction.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the worldwide blue whale population has plummeted from an estimated 275,000 to less than 5,000. The Southern Ocean—once home to ninety percent of the species—was particularly hard-hit when advanced whaling techniques developed in the early 1900s facilitated concentrated killing. Today, the Antarctic blue whale population is estimated to be between 400 and 1,100, based on six years of visual surveys by the International Whaling Commission. With such an alarmingly diminished population, further stresses from environmental change or mating complexities could lead to extinction.

So little is known about the blue whale population and its behaviors that scientists didn't know what they would find when they deployed recorders on the ocean floor three years ago. "We expected to not hear blue whale calls," said Allan Sauter, a specialist in marine mammal acoustics at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego. "I was surprised that there were as many calls as there were."

The last two of eight total instruments deployed within a 400-mile spread in 2001 were pulled from the ocean floor in April. Whale songs recorded on the previously recovered moorings confirmed there are indeed blue whales in the Southern Ocean, and that individual whales stay in those waters year-round.

Despite the vocal activity recorded, there were no sightings of the aloof creatures, suggesting the animals have grown leery of human

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interaction. “For an animal that’s supposed to be among the dumbest of animals, the cow of the ocean, they’re very good at not being seen, even though they’re present,” Sauter said. “They learned the very hard way that ships don’t mean well by them.”

Still, Sauter admits the recent acoustic confirmation of blue whale song suggests the prospect of survival is not as bleak as once thought. “The fact that they seem to be in several places around Antarctica this many years after cessation of whaling is very hopeful,” he said.

While the acoustic research has been tremendously helpful, there is still much to learn. “We don’t know enough about their calling behaviors—how often they call, sexual differences in calling, how long they wait between calls,” said Ana Sirovic, a Scripps graduate student working on the project. Sauter hopes future deployments will be able to distinguish individual blue whales and determine how far a call travels, helping to form a picture of social structure and movement that may ultimately predict the fate of the remaining blue whales.

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