



#8908

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER BELUGAS

Grade Levels: 5-12

26 minutes

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DESCRIPTION

The white beluga whale lives only in the gulf of the St. Lawrence River in Canada. After years of deliberate destruction and exposure to heavy industrial waste, the belugas are an endangered species. Describes the whale's characteristics, behaviors, and unique features. Excellent photography of whales, including a live birth. One man's commitment to changing their environment is making a difference.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Subject Area: Life Sciences

- ◆ Standard: Understands relationships among organisms and their physical environment
 - Benchmark: Knows that all individuals of a species that exist together at a given place and time make up a population, and all populations living together and the physical factors with which they interact compose an ecosystem
 - Benchmark: Knows ways in which humans can alter the equilibrium of ecosystems, causing potentially irreversible effects (e.g., human population growth, technology, and consumption; human destruction of habitats through direct harvesting, pollution, and atmospheric changes)

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

1. To examine why belugas live in contaminated waters.
2. To demonstrate that belugas are a vulnerable species.
3. To stimulate interest in protecting a species.

BEFORE SHOWING

1. Both the United States and the Soviet natives studied belugas intensively during the Cold War. What might they have hoped to learn?
2. Locate the Gulf of St. Lawrence on a map. Why do you think this particular environment is so polluted? Why are belugas especially susceptible? What contaminants do you think might be harming them?

AFTER SHOWING

Discussion Items and Questions

1. The Canadian government's policy towards belugas through most of this century (using them as bombing practice; paying a bounty for their tails) appears misguided to us now. Are there other species we are currently treating as we once treated the beluga?
2. Biologists can obtain valuable data from belugas held in captivity. Does this justify capturing sociable marine mammals used to migrating over vast distances and isolating them?
3. Robert Michaud is a fan of whale-watching. Why? What are some of the positive and negative effects of this increasingly popular activity?



SUMMARY

Most of beluga life remains a mystery to us. These small whales are at the surface only 15% of the time, spending the rest of their lives 984 feet underwater. They can stay down half an hour at a time, travel up to 2.5 miles on one breath, and, thanks to their incredibly developed sonar, surface at exactly the same spot—an essential skill for diving under ice floes.

Sailors used to call the beautiful white beluga whales of the Gulf of St. Lawrence “sea canaries” because of the high-pitched whistling sounds they make. Today, there’s irony in the name. Like the canaries coal miners used to take down mine shafts, the belugas are warning us about the dangerous level of toxins in the environment we share with them.

Belugas have the misfortune of living in one of the world’s most heavily polluted waterways. Despite some clean-up efforts in the St. Lawrence, Canada’s heaviest industries still dump chemicals into the mouth of the waterway. Belugas suffer from pollutants such as mercury.

Activist and biologist Robert Michaud says the belugas offer us a precise picture of what our careless behavior is doing to the environment: “Belugas live in the St. Lawrence 365 days a year. Their problems of contamination come from this one place.” Like the belugas, we can’t simply pick up and leave our poisoned world.

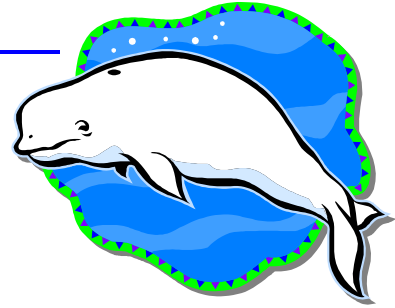


RELATED RESOURCES



Captioned Media Program

- The Great Whales #6251
- Manatees #7755
- Whales: Mammals of the Ocean #2586



World Wide Web



The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and "kid-safe" sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

- **BELUGA WHALES**

http://www.seaworld.org/beluga_whales/befirst.html

From the Sea World Education Department Resource, provides several factual information on the beluga whale, such as "Scientific Classification," "Physical Characteristics," "Behavior," "Conservation," and others.

- **CONTAMINANT ANALYSIS IN THE ST. LAWRENCE**

<http://whale.wheelock.edu/bwcontaminants/welcome.html>

A resource on contaminant analysis techniques, organochlorine contaminant properties and sources, and the impact and extent of contamination on blue whales in the St. Lawrence seaway.