Some results of gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) feeding group research off northeastern Sakhalin in 2019-2020

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RUSSIAN GRAY WHALE PROJECT

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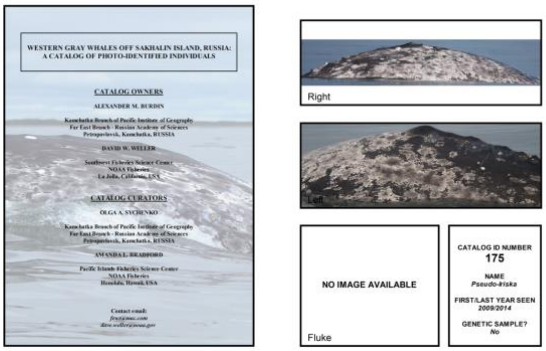
Background: Part of the feeding group of gray whales off the northeast coast of Sakhalin is still regarded by researchers as the surviving Western or Okhotsk-Korean population of gray whales, which is listed in the Red Book of Russia and IUCN list of endangered species in the category of "Critically endangered". The Russian gray whale project (RGWP) has regularly monitored this whales during the feeding season off Piltun Bay since 1995.

Material and methods: The main research methods are photo-identification of individuals and collection of biopsy samples. In addition, we are using drones for behavior observation.

Biopsy samples:

Photo-identification:



Using drones:

Results: Over two field seasons (2019- 2020), 81 gray whales were identified, of which 33 (28 calves and 5 whales at age 1+) had not previously been seen in the Piltun feeding area. In 2019, 21 new whales for the catalog were registered, of which 20 were calves, which is a maximum number in the entire history of many years of research, and only one aged 1+ has not previously been seen in the Piltun Lagoon area. 14 calves came to the feeding area with their mothers, and 6 calves, during the study period, were observed in the area without mothers. In 2020, out of 12 new whales sighted in the Piltun area, 8 were calves and were sighted during the period of work with their mothers. Thus, taking into account new gray whales (calves and age 1+) sighted in the Piltun feeding area in 2020, the catalog of the Sakhalin feeding group of gray whales represents 314 individuals.

Conclusion:
Regular monitoring and analysis of long-term data shows that this feeding group of gray whales is increasing by 2-5% annually. In connection with the large-scale development of oil and gas directly on the summer feeding grounds of gray whales, studies of this species off the northeastern coast of Sakhalin retain their relevance to this day.