



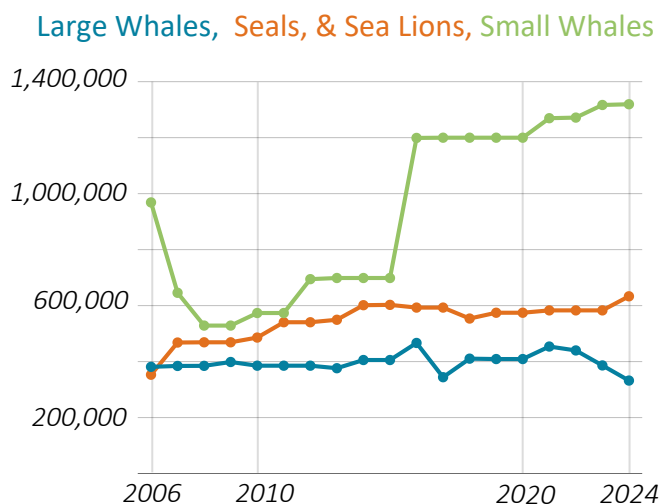
MARINE MAMMALS

California Coast and Ocean Report *Status, Progress, and What's Ahead* 2026

Few things stop a Californian in their tracks like a whale surfacing offshore or a sea otter floating in the kelp. California is home to nearly 40 species of marine mammals, including the blue whale, the largest animal on Earth. California's marine life are a source of wonder, ecological importance, and economic value through wildlife-based tourism. Most populations are rebounding from a century of hunting and whaling, but some, like the southern sea otter, remain threatened, and all face new risks from a changing ocean.

STATUS

Overall, marine mammal populations in California are healthy. Stock assessments by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 2024 showed that, out of 26 marine mammal species assessed, **most species are increasing or stable, and two species are in decline: killer whales and gray whales.** Gray whale populations have decreased by nearly 40% in recent years, likely due to environmental change.



Population of marine mammals over time (2006 to 2024), showing overall numbers to be stable or increasing.

PROGRESS

California leads the country in marine mammal protection. Working with fishing communities, the state developed and tested new **'whale-safe' fishing gear to prevent entanglement-related deaths**, which had been rising since 2014. When whales do become entangled, a **faster emergency response system**, built in partnership with federal agencies, the fishing industry, academics, and conservation groups, is now saving animals that would previously have died. California scientists are also developing tools to **predict where harmful algal blooms (HABs) will strike**, giving marine mammal responders a head start in responding to HAB-related illnesses and marine mammal strandings along the coast.

LOOKING AHEAD

Despite **encouraging signs of recovery and stability**, California's marine mammals are **still vulnerable**, especially in a changing ocean. The state is **doubling down on cutting-edge research and monitoring, technological innovation, and partnerships with fishing communities**, which will help protect these awe-inspiring species for generations to come.

DEEPER DIVE: PROTECTING BLUE WHALES BLUE SKIES PROGRAM

Fatal collisions with large ships threaten whales off California's coast in high traffic areas that overlap with habitat critical for whale feeding, migration and reproduction. **Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies** (BWBS) is a partnership between government agencies, research partners and conservation organizations working to make our air cleaner, and the ocean quieter and safer for whales. The program achieves these goals through a Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) zone in which ocean-going vessels of 300 GT (gross tons) and larger voluntarily slow down to 10 knots or less within sensitive whale habitats off California's coast.

Since 2014, the program has avoided over 200,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions, 5,900 tons of NOx emissions, and resulted in an estimated 50% reduction in whale strikes. The California Legislature recently enacted Assembly Bill 14 (Hart, 2025) to expand the success of this program statewide.



SPECIES HIGHLIGHTS



HUMPBACK WHALE populations have **increased** since monitoring began in 1990, but entanglement in fishing gear increased dramatically beginning in 2014, impacting humpback whales. Ship strikes are another ongoing threat to humpback whales.



GRAY WHALES Gray whales migrate along the entire West Coast, from the Arctic to Baja California. Gray whale populations have **decreased** by nearly 40% between 2019 and 2023 — a loss of tens of thousands of animals. This event was driven largely by ecosystem changes in Arctic feeding grounds that reduced birth rates and caused malnutrition, leaving gray whales more vulnerable in California waters.



CALIFORNIA SEA LION populations have fully **rebounded** to healthy levels under the protection of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. However, strandings of sea lions have recently increased, due to domoic acid poisoning caused by harmful algal blooms.



CALIFORNIA
OCEAN
PROTECTION
COUNCIL



CALIFORNIA
OCEAN SCIENCE TRUST

To learn more, visit
opc.ca.gov/TBD