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THE INSTITUTE OF CETACEAN RESEARCH

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ICR Research Contributes to New Assessment of Antarctic Blue Whale Abundance

The long-term scientific datasets generated through the Japanese Antarctic Research Programmes and international cooperation continue to provide value well beyond the original period of data collection.

A new scientific estimate of the Antarctic blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus intermedia*) population size, recently published in the journal *Endangered Species Research*, highlights the important contribution of large-scale, systematic, and long-term research and monitoring programmes, including Japan's Research Programme in the Antarctic (JARPA and JARPA II) and the International Whaling Commission's International Decade of Cetacean Research and Southern Ocean Whale and Ecosystem Research programme (IWC/IDCR-SOWER).

The study*, entitled *"Critically Endangered Antarctic blue whales are increasing but still far from pre-whaling levels,"* provides the first comprehensive population assessment of Antarctic blue whales in more than 40 years. By integrating historical whaling records, ship-based sighting surveys and photographic identification data, the researchers estimated that the Antarctic blue whale population increased from approximately 418 individuals in 1973 to around 4,018 in 2024.

Although this represents encouraging evidence of population recovery following the cessation of commercial whaling, the estimated current population for this subspecies remains only about 1.9% of its pre-whaling abundance.

Importantly, the assessment makes use of abundance information collected through both the circumpolar IWC/IDCR-SOWER surveys and Japan's JARPA and JARPA II research programmes that were conducted by the Institute of Cetacean Research. The International Antarctic whale surveys conducted under the IWC/IDCR-SOWER programmes between 1978/1979 and 2009/2010 provided valuable circumpolar abundance estimates, while the JARPA research contributed a series of repeated observations from the Antarctic waters of IWC Areas IV and V between 1989/1990 and 2009/2010.

These Japanese survey data provided an important independent source of information on changes in Antarctic blue whale abundance over time. Although the JARPA estimates covered only part of the Southern Ocean and therefore required adjustment to represent the wider circumpolar population, they helped strengthen the assessment by providing additional information on population trends.

The importance of these long-term datasets is also demonstrated by the study's sensitivity analyses, which examined how population estimates changed when individual data sources

were excluded. The results showed that the JARPA and SOWER datasets contributed complementary information to the integrated population assessment, helping researchers evaluate population recovery over several decades.

The Institute of Cetacean Research considers this study an important example of the enduring scientific value of systematic Antarctic whale research and international collaboration. Long-term and large-scaled observations, consistent survey methodologies, and the accumulation of reliable scientific data are essential for understanding the status of whale populations, particularly those that remain severely depleted.

The findings also reinforce the need for continued scientific monitoring of whale resources. Despite the positive recovery trend, Antarctic blue whales remain critically endangered, and face potential future pressures associated with changes in the marine ecosystem including Antarctic krill availability, climate change, as well as other human activities.

The Institute of Cetacean Research recognizes that the continuation of robust scientific research, including non-lethal methods such as dedicated sighting surveys, biopsy sampling, photographic identification and passive acoustic monitoring, is essential to assessing future population trends and improving understanding of the ecological factors affecting Antarctic blue whale recovery. Accordingly, the Institute will continue its ongoing JASS-A (Japanese Abundance and Stock-structure Surveys in the Antarctic) programme and advance research on cetacean resources, including rare species. The Institute also welcomes the participation of international researchers in these scientific activities.

The Institute of Cetacean Research appreciates the recognition of the scientific contribution of the IDCR/SOWER, JARPA and JARPA II research programmes to this important assessment and emphasizes the continuing value of long-term scientific research in supporting the conservation and management of Antarctic whale populations.

* Rand, Z. E., Olson, P. A., Kinzey, D., Double, M. C., Miller, B. S. Matsuoka, K., Findlay, K. and Branch, T. A. 2026. Critically Endangered Antarctic blue whales are increasing but still far from pre-whaling levels. *Endang. Species Res*. 61: esr01557. https://www.int-res.com/articles/esr2026/61/esr01557.pdf.

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