

Three Gray Whales Trapped in Alaskan Ice

Help is on the way for three whales trapped beneath the Arctic ice on Alaska's frozen north coast, but it is still a long distance off. A giant air-cushioned barge left Prudhoe Bay yesterday afternoon in hopes of creating a path for the whales to reach the sea. In the whales' favor, they are at their energy peak after fattening up all summer in the food rich Arctic waters getting ready for their long migration south to the waters off Mexico. The whales are now also rising to breathe in the new holes cut by rescuers. The California gray whales are sticking together, all three choosing the same hole at each breathing cycle.

(MAN SPEAKING) "The one that we were worried about - the slowest of the three - seems much better now. We think this may be because some folks have enlarged the opening that the animals have access to, and I think they are themselves less stressed now."

The nearest open ice channel is only 5 miles (about 7-8 kms) away, but just beyond that lurk polar bears, which are known to attack stressed whales.

(MAN SPEAKING) "It's getting darker and darker. There are polar bears out there that will certainly be attracted by a group of tired whales, so even if they escape from the ice they may still face other dangers."

There are other options for saving these whales, including dynamiting the ice to break it up, but biologists are concerned that the explosions may frighten the whales to death. Helicopter pilots are also experimenting with swinging a nine thousand pound concrete cylinder to smash the ice. Local Inuit people have given the whales the names "Siku" (meaning ice), "K'nik" (snowflake) and "Putu" (hole in the ice). However, some residents feel this rescue attempt may have gone far enough.

(MAN SPEAKING) "Personally, I think we ought to just come out in the middle of the night and end their suffering. They will suffer eventually because they're gonna lose these holes - we can't keep them open forever."

Ten to twenty rescuers are at the holes at any one time, hacking and chopping away to keep the ice from freezing over as the temperature drops below zero and continues to go down.