



**NOAA** NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



Jennifer Goebel  
617-335-4301

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## **NOAA Fisheries Team to Continue Research on Beluga Whales off Rhode Island**

Gloucester, MA (May 15, 2015): Days after Mystic Aquarium research scientists confirmed reports of beluga whale sightings off the coast of Rhode Island, with help from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is providing further assessment. Earlier today, a team from NOAA Fisheries, with assistance from Mystic Aquarium's Research and Animal Rescue teams, located the whales, and obtained biopsy samples to assess their health and genetic origin.

Robert Michaud, scientific director of the Group for Research and Education on Marine Mammals and coordinator of the Quebec Marine Mammal Emergency Response Network, was able to photo-identify one of the beluga whales as part of the threatened St. Lawrence population. This whale was last sighted in 2013. While unconfirmed, it is believed that the others are from the same population. The St. Lawrence belugas have been in a slow population decline for the past decade and were believed to number only around 900 animals in 2013, down from more than 10,000 in the late 1800s.

Although the St. Lawrence population of beluga whales is not listed as threatened or endangered under the U.S.'s Endangered Species Act, these visitors are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act in U.S. waters. Beluga whales have been spotted in Narragansett waters once before, and individuals are occasionally seen in waters off Maine and Massachusetts as well. This is the first time a group of three whales has been spotted together in regional waters, says NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Response Coordinator Mendy Garron.

"These whales may have followed the cold waters of the Labrador current down along the coast," says Garron. "Water temperatures are still cool in the Northeast, which may be favorable for beluga whales and their prey."

NOAA Fisheries and Mystic Aquarium reminds residents and boaters in the area that Federal guidelines require people to stay at least 100 feet away from the animals and not chase them or impede their movements. Vessels should slow to no-wake speeds if

near the whales. Please don't try to interact or feed the whales, as these activities will be detrimental to their health and well-being.

"We ask that boaters keep a sharp lookout for these whales when starting their boats in the marina," said Garron. "We also ask that should the whales approach your boat, you put your boat in neutral until they have passed safely. Also, please report any sightings. Locating the whales will help us keep them safe."

Please report any sightings to NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Stranding and Entanglement Hotline at 866-755-NOAA (6622) or to Mystic Aquarium's Animal Rescue Hotline at 860.572.5955 ext. 107.

Interaction with beluga whales and all marine mammals is prohibited under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Please report harassment to the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement Hotline at 800-853-1964.

Regional Marine Mammal Viewing Guidelines are available at:

<http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/Protected/mmp/viewing/approaching/>

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### **About NOAA Fisheries**

*NOAA Fisheries is responsible for the stewardship of the nation's ocean resources and their habitat. We provide vital services for the nation: productive and sustainable fisheries, safe sources of seafood, the recovery and conservation of protected resources, and healthy ecosystems—all backed by sound science and an ecosystem-based approach to management.*

### **About Mystic Aquarium**

*Mystic Aquarium is a division of Sea Research Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization, and is counted among the nation's leading aquariums with more than 300 species and an extensive collection of marine mammals, including New England's only beluga whales. Mystic Aquarium has been a pioneer in offering guests a variety of up close encounters with a wide range of marine animals. The mission of Mystic Aquarium is to inspire people to care for and protect our ocean planet through conservation, education and research. Sea Research receives major support from United Technologies Corporation, The Coca-Cola Company and Foxwoods Resort Casino. Learn more at [mysticaquarium.org](http://mysticaquarium.org) or [searesearch.org](http://searesearch.org).*

