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Walrus Study Seeks to Prove Family Ties

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The 2,000 to 3,000 walruses living in the remote Laptev Sea could be threatened due to increased oil exploration in the Arctic, according to the findings of a scientific expedition that the World Wildlife Fund and Canon presented this week.

The joint project's goal was to discover more about the nature and genetic makeup of the poorly studied species and find ways to protect them in the face of increased economic activity in the area.

Walruses are traditionally hunted for their meat, skin and tusks. Now their habitat is also facing pressure from escalating natural resources exploration while knowledge of how these species live and how to protect them is practically nonexistent, said Igor Chestin, head of WWF Russia, on Wednesday.

"Exploration for hydrocarbons has already started. There are rigs standing on the Taimyr

shore and seismic studies being done on the Khatangsky Gulf," Chestin said. "It is important for ecologists to quickly gather information so that they can formulate scientifically-backed arguments against the economic activity [in the area] before this activity irreversibly damages the environment."

An international team of scientists from Russia, Sweden and the U.S. started their expedition to the remote Laptev Sea on August 12 and for two weeks collected 32 samples of walrus tissue for genetic analysis.

The samples were sent to institutes in Moscow and Norway and results will be ready in a few months, according to WWF. Specifically, the scientists are trying to find out whether the walruses in the Laptev Sea have any links to Atlantic or Pacific walruses, the latter of which is listed in the Russian Red Book of endangered species.

Ecologists said that if the Laptev walruses were found to be an isolated population, this would be a key argument for why the government should increase protective measures for the species.

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