Southern Residents can recover, but only if threats are reduced

In 2025, a panel of 31 international scientists laid out a plan to recover endangered Southern Resident killer whales. Without action, these whales have a high probability of extinction.[1,2] The plan tackles their key threats: insufficient food, underwater noise and disturbance from vessels, and toxic pollution.[3]

The science is clear

The recommendations reflect the most recent data and ecological understanding of these whales, emphasizing long-term conservation strategies that support recovery.[4]

Rebuild killer whale food supply

- Protect whales' access to fat rich Fraser River Chinook salmon that migrate through the river from March to August.[5,6]
- Recovering wild Chinook is key to rebuilding prey.[7] Hatchery fish are often too small and too low in fat to support their needs.[8]
- Set prey thresholds that trigger fishery closures when Chinook abundance falls below the whales' energy needs.[9]
- Move ocean fisheries closer to rivers: this gives whales access before fisheries & helps rebuild bigger, older Chinook salmon.[10,11]

Quiet whale feeding grounds

- Set noise reduction targets that ensure the whales can communicate and hunt. Require new projects to stay below the targets.[12]
- Since vessel noise increases with speed, ship slowdowns should expand in time & area.[13]
- Set mandatory noise standards for large commercial vessels entering Salish Sea ports. Target the loudest ships first.[14]

Stop pollution at its source

- High levels of PCBs and PBDEs still occur in whales, salmon and their habitats. End legacy use of PCBs in equipment and in storage. Clean up contaminated sites.[15]
- Prioritize emerging contaminants like forever chemicals (PFAS) and tire-related chemicals (6PPD-quinone) that threaten salmon.[16]
- Focus chemical management on long-lived species high in the food chain, like Southern Residents. Address pollutants that can harm salmon and accumulate in food webs.[17]

Tackle threats together

- Insufficient prey, noise and pollutants are connected threats. Coordinated action is needed on all three, with monitoring and adjustments as new evidence emerges.[18]

The problem is not identifying threats; it is reducing those threats at a scale sufficient to enable recovery. The greatest risk is failing to act.

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