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## **Hawai‘i’s False Killer Whales at Risk**

A paper published in the April 2009 issue of the journal *Pacific Science* provides evidence that the Hawaiian Islands population of false killer whales, a poorly-known species of tropical oceanic whale, has declined substantially over the last 20 years.

False killer whales don’t look much like killer whales – the name comes from similarity in skull shape. But false killer whales share a similar life history with killer whales; both are long-lived (reaching 50 to 60 years or more), don’t start reproducing until their teens, and are slow to reproduce (having calves perhaps every five or more years). Such factors make recovery from population declines a slow and uncertain process. Like the resident killer whales of Washington state, false killer whales around the main Hawaiian Islands are genetically isolated from other populations of the species. These are truly Hawaiian false killer whales, the only known island-associated and genetically isolated population of this species anywhere in the world. The paper published in the journal *Pacific Science* documents a 1989 survey where a minimum of 470 individuals were counted around the main Hawaiian Islands; in recent years the estimate of the island-associated population is only of 123 individuals. Aerial surveys conducted from 1993 to 2003 show a strong declining trend in sighting rates.

Why has the population declined? False killer whales in Hawai‘i feed on game fish like yellowfin tuna, swordfish, and mahi mahi, and the biomass of all of these species has declined. Because they are long lived and feed high on the food web, they are likely to have accumulated high levels of toxins like PCBs, DDTs and flame retardants. And false killer whales in Hawai‘i interact with long-line and other fisheries; in offshore waters the bycatch in the long-line fishery is greater than what the offshore population is able to sustain. All of these factors may have contributed to the decline of the island-associated population.

This species regularly uses waters of the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, and a presentation at the First International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas by one of the authors of the *Pacific Science* paper argues that false killer whales should be added to the Sanctuary as a new “resource” – this population is the smallest and most at risk population of whale or dolphin in Hawaiian waters.

For a copy of the *Pacific Science* paper, as well as photos, video, and copies of other publications on this species in Hawai‘i and elsewhere, go to [www.cascadiaresearch.org/robin/falsekillerwhale.htm](http://www.cascadiaresearch.org/robin/falsekillerwhale.htm)