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RUSSIAN FEDERAL «RESEARCH INSTITUTE
OF FISHERIES AND OCEANOGRAPHY»
«VNIRO»

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In connection with large number of appeals received from the citizens concerned about the release of marine mammals from Srednyaya Bay to the Sea of Okhotsk to the VNIRO, and in order to quickly provide information on this issue, we report the following.

At present, the issues of conservation, rehabilitation and release into natural habitat of orcas and belugas contained in Srednyaya Bay, Primorsky Region, are determined by meeting with Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation A.V. Gordeev, according to which the coordination of scientific support on the rehabilitation and release of marine mammals contained in Srednyaya Bay, was assigned to VNIRO. In pursuance of this assignment, on March 1 VNIRO formed a scientific Consilium of leading scientists from research organizations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Universities and the Federal Agency for Fisheries. The scientific council determined the program and schedule of measures for the preservation of marine mammals, including conducting a full-scale veterinary and biological examination of animals to assess their physical condition and health, assess the ecological status of the Srednyaya Bay M and conditions of marine mammals, and develop scientific recommendations for improving the conditions of marine mammals and plans for their return to natural habitat. To carry out these activities, representatives of the Consilium repeatedly traveled to Srednyaya Bay. Leading veterinary specialists from the Moscow State Academy of Veterinary Medicine and Biotechnology named after K.I. Scriabin and the St. Petersburg Academy of Veterinary Medicine. Thus, organizing the work of the Scientific Consilium, VNIRO contributed to attracting the best scientific forces and research organizations involved in marine mammals in the Russian Federation to the solution of the problem of preservation of cetaceans in Srednyaya Bay. During the visit to the Srednyaya Bay by a team of Jean-Michel Cousteau's experts/ "Whale Reserve" project in April 2019, the members of Consilium repeatedly met with the team of Jean-Michel Cousteau to discuss plans and coordinate work on the study and adaptation of marine mammals. In his public speeches, Jean - Michel Cousteau praised the work of Russian scientists in ensuring the conservation of marine mammals in Srednyaya Bay. Further representatives of the team J.-M. Cousteau constantly participated in the meetings of the Consilium and its Working Groups, and all the suggestions and recommendations

of the experts of the team J.-M. Cousteau was taken into account in the recommendations of Consilium.

In May-June 2019, the members of the Consilium analyzed possible places for the release of orcas and belugas in the Sea of Okhotsk and options for the delivery of marine mammals there. At the meetings of the Consilium of scientists and the Working Group on the rehabilitation of animals at the Consilium, all possible ways of rehabilitation were discussed, including the recommendations of the Cousteau team. Unfortunately, these recommendations were not fully implemented by the owners of the animals. In early June, the media reported that children's excursions were organized in Srednyaya Bay. Experts of "VNIRO" immediately contacted organizations containing cetaceans in Srednyaya Bay, and persuaded them to stop the excursions, limiting people's access to animals.

Starting from June 5, a temporary rehabilitation program for orcas and belugas was launched in the Center for the temporary keeping of marine mammals in Srednyaya Bay, in accordance with the recommendations of the Scientific Consilium earlier sent. In the course of re-adaptation, animal contacts with humans were radically reduced; animals were fed without direct contact with humans according to a random "floating" schedule. At the same time, the attention of mammals was switched to underwater conditions by placing underwater objects in the cages that attract the attention of animals. During the re-adaptation period, all animals planned for shipment were subjected to veterinary and microbiological examinations (blood tests, microflora of the mucous membranes of the upper respiratory tract and skin), which did not reveal the presence of pathogenic forms dangerous to wild relatives. No excursions were provided during the re-adaptation program.

At the regular meeting of the Council on June 18, 2019, a plan for the release of animals was reviewed and approved. It should be noted that representatives of the J.-M. Cousteau team took part in this meeting also supported the plan, including the methods and route of transport of mammals. In the period from June 20 to 25 and from July 11 to 16, 2019, the first and second batches of marine mammals (5 orcas and 6 belugas) were transported from Srednyaya Bay to the coast of the Okhotsk Sea in the Shantar Islands area.

On June 27 and July 16, all animals were successfully released. Thus, the statements that the shipment was carried out contrary to the agreed recommendations of leading Russian and international scientists are not true.

The release of orcas and belugas was accompanied by the installation of satellite tags, allowing to track their movement in the wild nature. Scientists of VNIRO and A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution have the opportunity to observe this process, and information on their movements began to be published on the VNIRO website. Unfortunately, to provide the right to other persons to access data from satellite tags in a permanent mode is technically impossible.

The appeals claim that unprepared orcas and belugas carried for many days in tight containers along bumpy roads were not fed at the site, were not given the opportunity to recover, to restore motor functions and social connections and that there were no sea enclosures for these purposes. On this occasion, we consider it necessary to note that the transportation in transporting baths today is the only possible way of

transporting animals by existing means of transport. Firstly, it is possible to lift the container with a crane and install it in a large wagon in dimensions that are safe from the point of view of transportation, and load it on a ship. There was one orca or 3 belugas in each container of 9 * 2,9 * 2,9 meters in size. The walls of the container were foam-coated from the inside, which prevented possible injury to animals while moving over rough terrain. The belugas had the opportunity to dive and be in constant motion, could not completely submerge in water, but the length of the container allowed them to remain mobile. To prevent drying of the skin of orcas their backs and fins were covered with a special protective ointment of white color. In order to ensure safe drive along the entire route from the Srednyaya Bay to Khabarovsk traffic police patrol cars accompanied the caravan with marine mammals.

The animals were not fed during transportation, and this was done deliberately to keep the water clean of excrement. We should note it that in the natural habitat orcas and belugas can do without food for a month or more, while they are constantly moving, losing calories. During the time spent in the Srednyaya Bay and belugas had a regular diet and by the beginning of transportation accumulated a significant fat layer. So, feeding the animals before release into the sea was considered impractical. This could trigger the emergence of unneeded reflexes when the animals are released, that could significantly reduce chances on the transition to independent hunting.

To reduce the time the animals stay in manmade constructions (baths, enclosures, etc.) that restrict their movement, scientists decided to use a special method of release through a transport cage installed on the twin-hulled ship. After veterinary examination, blood sampling and installation of satellite tags animals were placed in this cage, where experienced trainers gave each animal a special massage, stretched fins, tail and body, achieving normalization of muscle tone. The analysis of health status, behavior of animals after arrival on Perovsky Cape revealed that there were no deviations. Taking into account all the above, the scientists of VNIRO, veterinarians and trainers accompanying the column concluded that the animals are ready for release and they do not require additional rehabilitation. After carrying out adaptation measures, massage, stretching, restoration of muscle tone animals were released in the sea.

The place of release (Perovsky Cape) was chosen taking into account the recommendations of the Consilium, infrastructure requirements and transport accessibility. As it is known, there are few roads and almost no permanent settlements on the coast of the Shantar region of the Sea of Okhotsk. In addition, heavy trucks with containers and a crane with a capacity of 25 tons can't always drive up to the coastline. Therefore, the specialists chose a place near Perovsky Cape, where there is a fishing base, which has all the necessary equipment.

As for the statement about the impossibility to restore the social relationship of animals before the release, we report that nor did orcas or belugas lose these connections during transportation. There were 3 belugas in each bath, additional recovery of connections between them is not required. Baths with orcas were close to each other during the whole process of transportation, the animals constantly communicated and after release they did not lose contact with each other for a minute.

Regarding the statement about the need to release all 10 orcas at the same time, and belugas—in large groups of several dozen animals, as well as the need to separate their release time and geographical location, we consider it necessary to note that such a recommendation was never given by the Scientific Council, including representatives of the Cousteau team. Experts have decided to release animals in groups based on social ties between animals. They did this for both orcas and beluga whales. This was a release of animals, which spent 10 months in the same cage. At first, the orcas were released and given time to go to a safe distance, and then the specialists released the belugas.

The statement that the entire operation was carried out by VNIRO in an atmosphere of complete opacity and secrecy is not true. The whole country watched the transportation of animals from the Srednyaya Bay on television in a live stream with President of Russia V.V. Putin. Everyone willing to watch the process was present near to the enclosures with animals in Srednyaya Bay. At the second stage of release (July 11-16), the transport column with animals was accompanied from Vladivostok to Khabarovsk by activists of environmental non-governmental organizations. They observed the progress of loading of animals on the ship in the port of Khabarovsk and noted the high professionalism of the specialists who accompanied the killer whales. The organizers did not create any obstacles for the participation of the public at all stages of transportation and release of animals, there was only one restriction for the approach directly to the animals in order to avoid additional stress for them, so a sanitary zone that allows access only to scientists, veterinarians and trainers was created.

Photos and videos informing the public about the course of the operation were promptly posted on the official website of VNIRO and in social networks.

We are in constant contact with a number of public environmental organizations and their activists - we additionally send materials on their requests.

Thus, in the current conditions, taking into account climate and other factors associated with the implementation of the first stage of releasing animals into their natural habitat, the maximum possible was done to save the life and health of orcas and beluga whales, and to their safe return to their natural habitat.

Data from satellite tags on the bodies of orcas and belugas inform that after release they safely reached the places of their catch, where there is a needed food base and the ability to connect with their wild relatives.

This response to the appeal is posted on the official website of the “VNIRO” (<http://vniro.ru>) in accordance with the provisions of part 2 of article 6 and part 4 of article 10 of the Federal law of 02.05.2006 № 59-FL.

Acting Director



N.V. Kulik

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