

Beluga Import Project Timeline

- **2004:** Georgia Aquarium searches zoological facilities worldwide for beluga whales to acquire. Search concludes no whales available with one exception. Two male whales, originally sourced in Russia, at a facility under a roller coaster in Mexico City, were in guarded condition and in need of rescue.

Additionally, a zoological expert from Georgia Aquarium was sent to eastern Russia, Chkalov Island, to explore potential for acquisition of whales from a company that sources whales from the Sea of Okhotsk. Results of the trip indicated collection from this population could be possible but a population abundance study would be necessary to ensure compliance with Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

- **2005:** Georgia Aquarium rescues two beluga whales from Mexico City and acquires three female whales on breeding loan from a partner facility. Evaluation of the existing collection at Georgia Aquarium and at accredited partner facilities in North America indicates the population of whales will not sustain due to low number of animals and lack of genetic diversity.
- **2007:** Georgia Aquarium provides funding along with SeaWorld, Ocean Park Corp. of Hong Kong; [Mystic Aquarium](#) in [Mystic](#), Conn.; and Kamogawa Sea World of Japan for scientists from the Russian Academy of Sciences A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution to conduct a comprehensive population abundance and genetics study of the population of beluga whales in the Western Sea of Okhotsk (in the Sakhalin-Amur region of far East Russia).

A second Georgia Aquarium zoological expert was sent to the far east of Russia, Chkalov Island to observe collection and release of whales for the beluga population abundance and satellite tagging study. The official confirms the process and techniques witnessed were similar to the methods used by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)/Fisheries and other researchers and agencies during cetacean tagging and health assessments; methods that are common in wildlife biology and determined to be humane (i.e. required Institutional Animal Care and Use review of protocols as regulated by the U.S. Animal Welfare Act).

- **2008:** Georgia Aquarium continues funding along with SeaWorld, Ocean Park Corp. of Hong Kong; [Mystic Aquarium](#) in [Mystic](#), Conn.; and Kamogawa Sea World of Japan for an independent population abundance and genetics study of beluga whales in the Western Sea of Okhotsk.
- **2009:** Georgia Aquarium begins dialogue with NOAA Fisheries permits division regarding the draft of an import permit to acquire beluga whales from Russia. NOAA encourages Georgia Aquarium to apply to import an appropriate number of whales to achieve a sustainable population in human care in North America. This approach would mitigate the need to import beluga whales in the future.



- **2010:** A third Georgia Aquarium zoological expert was sent to Chkalov Island in the Russian far east, to observe beluga whale collection and release of whales for beluga tagging and population abundance study. The official also confirms the process and techniques witnessed were similar to the methods used by NOAA Fisheries and other researchers and agencies during cetacean tagging and health assessments; methods that are common in wildlife biology and determined to be humane.

The Russian Academy of Sciences A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution concludes five years of population abundance research on the wild population of beluga whales in the Western Sea of Okhotsk. The research concludes that this population of belugas is stable and that acquiring a limited number from this population will have no negative impact on its sustainability.

Georgia Aquarium informs Russians of intent to import 18 whales so animals can be identified for Georgia Aquarium's import permit application.

Georgia Aquarium establishes partnership with a zoological park in Asia, Ocean Park Hong Kong, and develops plan to move whales identified for import permit to contemporary facilities at that park while waiting for permit approval.

- **2011:** The highly respected, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), formed an independent scientific review panel, led by the Chair of the IUCN Species Specialists Group for Cetaceans, to assess the sustainability of live capture removals of beluga whales from Sakhalin-Amur region of the Sea of Okhotsk. The assessment was peer-reviewed and validated the removal of the whales would have no detrimental impact on this beluga whale population. IUCN's assessment is later published and made available to the public. Georgia Aquarium and others are all listed as participants in the study.

Georgia Aquarium prepares to move the whales identified for import to a contemporary facility at Ocean Park Hong Kong. Days before transport, Ocean Park Hong Kong backs out of the project due to pressure from the animal extremist community. With this change in plans, Georgia Aquarium invests in infrastructure at Utrish Marine Station to establish appropriate animal management options for the Russian team to care for the whales during the permit application review process. This investment included building larger pools, food, and animal care staff, veterinary medicine and supplies and our zoological experts and veterinarians visiting the station. Additionally, Georgia Aquarium executes contract agreement for the Russians to provide care for the whales while they are managed at the Utrish Marine Station and establishes routine schedule of Georgia Aquarium officials to visit Utrish Marine Station to monitor well-being of animals and provide feedback to Russian team.

- **2012:** Georgia Aquarium filed a permit application with NOAA Fisheries to import to the United States 18 beluga whales that had previously been collected from the Sea of Okhotsk in 2006, 2010 and 2011.



Georgia Aquarium takes part in a hearing that allowed public comment on the import permit application. More than 15 scientific, academic, conservation, and animal welfare experts speak to support Georgia Aquarium's permit request.

- **2013:** Despite already completing its extensive permit application review process, issuing an environmental assessment report and drafting the approval letter for the permit, NOAA Fisheries suddenly changed direction and denied the Aquarium's permit application.

Georgia Aquarium reviews the denial letter and disagrees with NOAA's reason for denying the permit and files a complaint in a U.S District Court in Georgia against NOAA Fisheries and the Department of Commerce seeking to overturn the permit denial. Taking the decision to court was the only option for the Aquarium.

- **Summer 2013:** The first of four unfortunate losses occurs. Between 2013-2015, there were four unfortunate losses from a variety of causes; including complications from ingesting marine debris, and localized infection of undetermined origin which became systemic. As a couple of the animals became ill, we believe their health was further compromised by long term management at a temporary facility. These cases were made challenging as the Russian team does not have the contemporary resources found at accredited facilities which allow for timely response to health issues as well as easy separation of animals for medical purposes.
- **August 2014:** Georgia Aquarium files a motion to supplement the record, asking the court to require the release of more than 20 documents deliberately withheld by NOAA Fisheries from consideration by the court. These records pertain to NOAA Fisheries' early indications to approve the import, the preparation of the import and a complete environmental assessment showing that issuance of the permit complied with the law. In addition, the records pertain to any meetings and discussions that then led to the sudden reversal and denial of the permit, and NOAA's research papers that showed their population counting methods were arbitrary, and have never been used before or since.
- **November 2014:** The second of four unfortunate losses occurs. Between 2013-2015, there were four unfortunate losses from a variety of causes; including complications from ingesting marine debris, and localized infection of undetermined origin which became systemic. As a couple of the animals became ill, we believe their health was further compromised by long term management at a temporary facility. These cases were made challenging as the Russian team does not have the contemporary resources found at accredited facilities which allow for timely response to health issues as well as easy separation of animals for medical purposes.
- **December 2014:** The motion to supplement the record is denied. Georgia Aquarium files a motion with the court arguing that -- based on the facts before NOAA -- their permit denial was arbitrary, capricious and not in accordance with law. Georgia Aquarium asks the judge to invalidate the permit denial and to order that the permit to import the whales be issued.



- **Summer 2015:** The final two of four unfortunate losses occurs. Between 2013-2015, there were four unfortunate losses from a variety of causes; including complications from ingesting marine debris, and localized infection of undetermined origin which became systemic. As a couple of the animals became ill, we believe their health was further compromised by long term management at a temporary facility. These cases were made challenging as the Russian team does not have the contemporary resources found at accredited facilities which allow for timely response to health issues as well as easy separation of animals for medical purposes.
- **August 14, 2015:** Georgia Aquarium participates in oral arguments to ask the court to uphold the MMPA and its strong support of zoological institutions, and order issuance of a permit to bring the belugas into the U.S. as soon as possible.
- **September 2015:** SeaWorld backs out of beluga import project publically and will no longer take any of the beluga whales destined for U.S. accredited facilities upon pending NOAA permit approval.
- **September 28, 2015:** The U.S District Court issues a 100-page document denying the permit application and giving Georgia Aquarium 60 days to decide if they want to appeal that decision.
- **November 2015:** Out of concern for the welfare of the animals, Georgia Aquarium makes the difficult decision not to appeal the court decision
- **April 2016:** Although Georgia Aquarium had no legal obligation to continue sending support or supplies after the permit decision, the Aquarium continued to send funds for veterinary supplies and food in its last six months. The Aquarium sent support through the end of April of 2016.

