

# **A marine protected area as a tool to protect marine mammals at risk, their habitats and food resources in the St. Lawrence Estuary (Quebec, Canada)**

**G. Cantin<sup>1</sup> and L. Bossé<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Maurice Lamontagne Institute, 850 route de la Mer, Mont-Joli, Québec, Canada, G5H 3Z4, < [Canting@dfo-mpo.gc.ca](mailto:Canting@dfo-mpo.gc.ca) >, Ph: 418-775-0725

The St. Lawrence Estuary, which is an important area for many species of pinnipeds, odontocetes and mysticetes, drains a vast, heavily urbanized and industrialized watershed which is also characterized by intensive agriculture. Additional environmental pressures come from the commercial ships and tankers that use the St. Lawrence seaway and the important whale watching and pleasure boating activities. Thus, marine mammals in this area face many pressures, including contamination of the marine food chain by persistent toxics, disturbance from commercial shipping, tour vessels and pleasure boats, the risk of oil spills, entanglement in fishing gear, physical changes to their habitat and fluctuations in the availability of food resources. The St. Lawrence Estuary Marine Protected Area (MPA) project includes a) the summer range of the St. Lawrence Beluga whale and important feeding sites for the Blue whale, which both have been listed as an endangered population by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), b) concentration areas for other cetaceans, including Fin whale and Harbour porpoise, classified as “special concern”, and c) most of the Estuary haulouts used by the Harbour seal, a resident species that is presumed to be at risk. The goal of this MPA is the long-term conservation and protection of marine mammals in this area, along with their habitats and food resources, in order to favour the seasonal return of large cetaceans and, in particular, the survival of Belugas and Harbour seals in the St. Lawrence Estuary. The establishment of this MPA is recommended by the St-Lawrence Beluga Whale Recovery Plan and many actions that will be enforced with this MPA come directly from the plan. We will describe the situation in terms of environmental pressures and threats and the species most affected in the Estuary, and present the process of establishing this MPA.