

PYGMY KILLER WHALE (*Feresa attenuata*): Hawaii Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Pygmy killer whales are found in tropical and subtropical waters throughout the world (Ross and Leatherwood 1994). They are poorly known in most parts of their range. Small numbers have been taken directly and incidentally in both the western and eastern Pacific. Pryor *et al.* (1965) noted that pygmy killer whales appeared to be resident off Oahu. Resightings of several individuals over several decades indicate resident groups off Kona and leeward Oahu (McSweeney *et al.* 2009, Baird 2016). Summer/fall shipboard surveys of the waters within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Hawaiian Islands, resulted in three sightings of pygmy killer whales in 2002, five in 2010, and three in 2017 (Figure 1; Barlow 2006, Bradford *et al.* 2017, Yano *et al.* 2018).

Pygmy killer whales in Hawaiian waters may comprise more than one demographically independent population. A 22-year study off the Hawaii Island indicates that pygmy killer whales occur there year-round and in stable social groups. Over 80% of pygmy killer whales seen off Hawaii Island have been resighted and 92% have been linked into a single social network (McSweeney *et al.* 2009). Movements have also been documented between Hawaii Island and Oahu and between Oahu and Lanai (Baird *et al.* 2011a). Satellite telemetry data from four tagged pygmy killer whales suggest this resident group remains within 20km of shore (Baird *et al.* 2011a, 2011b). Encounter rates for pygmy killer whales during near shore surveys are rare, representing less than 1.7% of all cetacean encounters since 2000 (Baird *et al.* 2013). Division of this population into a separate island-associated stock may be warranted in the future.

For the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) stock assessment reports, there is a single Pacific management stock including animals found both within the Hawaiian Islands EEZ and in adjacent high seas waters. Because data on abundance, distribution, and human-caused impacts are largely lacking for high seas waters, the status of this stock is evaluated based on data from U.S. EEZ waters of the Hawaiian Islands (NMFS 2005).

POPULATION SIZE

Encounter data from shipboard line-transect surveys of the entire Hawaiian Islands EEZ were recently reevaluated for each survey year, resulting in the following abundance estimates of pygmy killer whales in the Hawaii EEZ (Bradford *et al.* 2021; Table 1).

Table 1. Line-transect abundance estimates for pygmy killer whales derived from surveys of the entire Hawaii EEZ in 2002, 2010, and 2017 (Bradford *et al.* 2021).

| Year | Abundance | CV | 95% Confidence Limits |
|------|-----------|------|-----------------------|
| 2017 | 10,328 | 0.75 | 2,771-38,491 |
| 2010 | 27,833 | 0.50 | 10,950-70,747 |
| 2002 | 3,854 | 0.77 | 1,015-14,640 |

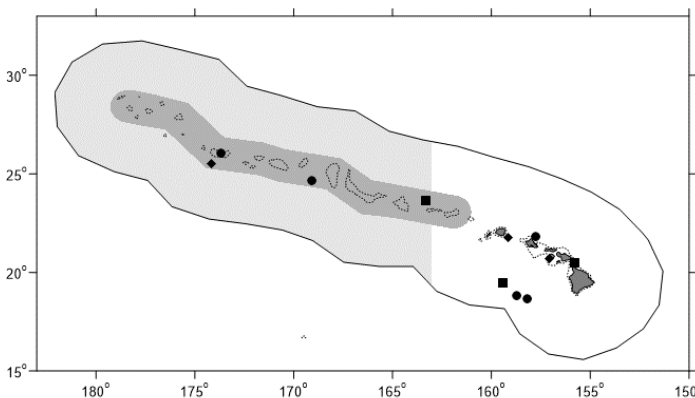


Figure 1. Pygmy killer whale sighting locations during the 2002 (diamond), 2010 (circle), and 2017 (square) shipboard surveys of U.S. EEZ waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands (Barlow 2006, Bradford *et al.* 2017, Yano *et al.* 2018). Outer line represents approximate boundary of survey area and U.S. EEZ. Dark gray shading indicates the original Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, with the lighter gray shading denoting the full 2016 Expansion area. Dotted line represents the 1000 m isobath.

The updated design-based abundance estimates use sighting data from throughout the central Pacific to estimate the detection function and use Beaufort sea-state-specific trackline detection probabilities derived for pygmy killer whales following the methods of Barlow *et al.* (2015). Although previous estimates from the Hawaii EEZ have been published using subsets of this data, Bradford *et al.* (2021), uses a consistent approach for estimating all abundance parameters and are considered the best available estimates for each survey year. The best estimate of abundance for this stock is based on the 2017 survey, or 10,328 (CV=0.75). A population estimate has been made for this species in the eastern tropical Pacific (Wade and Gerrodette 1993), but it is not known whether any of these animals are part of the same population that occurs around the Hawaiian Islands.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population size is calculated as the lower 20th percentile of the log-normal distribution (Barlow *et al.* 1995) of the 2017 abundance estimate or 5,885 pygmy killer whales within the Hawaiian EEZ.

Current Population Trend

The three available abundance estimates for this stock have very broad and overlapping confidence intervals, precluding robust evaluation of population trend for this stock.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

No data are available on current or maximum net productivity rate for pygmy killer whales.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for pygmy killer whales stock is calculated as the minimum population estimate for the U.S. EEZ of the Hawaiian Islands (5,885) times one half the default maximum net growth rate for cetaceans ($\frac{1}{2}$ of 4%) times a recovery factor of 0.5 (for a stock of unknown status with no known fishery mortality or serious injury within the Hawaiian Islands EEZ; Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 59 pygmy killer whales per year.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

Information on fishery-related mortality and serious injury of cetaceans in Hawaiian waters is limited, but the gear types used in Hawaii fisheries are responsible for marine mammal mortality and serious injury in other fisheries throughout U.S. waters. Entanglement in gillnets and hooking or entanglement in various hook and line fisheries have been reported for small cetaceans in Hawaii (Nitta & Henderson, 1993). A stranded pygmy killer whale from Oahu showed signs of hooking injury (Schofield 2007) and mouthline injuries have also been noted in some individuals (Baird unpublished data), though it is not known if these interactions result in serious injury or mortality. No estimates of human-caused mortality or serious injury are currently available for nearshore hook and line or gillnet fisheries because these fisheries are not observed or monitored for protected species bycatch.

There are currently two distinct longline fisheries based in Hawaii: a deep-set longline (DSL) fishery that targets primarily tunas, and a shallow-set longline fishery (SSL) that targets swordfish. Both fisheries operate within U.S. waters and on the high seas. Between 2014 and 2018, no pygmy killer whales were observed hooked or entangled in the SSL fishery (100% observer coverage), or in the DSL fishery (20-21% observer coverage) (Bradford 2018a, 2018b, 2020, Bradford and Forney 2017, McCracken 2019). There were four additional unidentified cetaceans taken in the DSL fishery during this period, some of which may have been pygmy killer whales.

Other Mortality

Loud underwater sounds, such as active sonar and seismic operations, may be harmful to beaked whales (Cox *et al.* 2006) and other cetaceans, including melon-headed whales (Southall *et al.* 2006, 2013, Brownell *et al.* 2009) and pygmy killer whales (Wang and Yang 2006). The use of active sonar from military vessels has been implicated in mass strandings of beaked whales, and recent mass-stranding reports suggest some delphinids may be impacted as well. Two mass-strandings of pygmy killer whales occurred in the coastal areas of southwest Taiwan in February 2005, possibly associated with offshore naval training exercises (Wang and Yang 2006). A necropsy of one of the pygmy killer whales revealed hemorrhaging in the cranial tissues of the animal. Additional research on the behavioral

response of delphinids in the presence of sonar transmissions is needed in order to understand the level of impact. No estimates of potential mortality or serious injury are available for U.S. waters.

STATUS OF STOCK

The Hawaii stock of pygmy killer whales is not considered strategic under the 1994 amendments to the MMPA. The status of pygmy killer whales in Hawaiian waters relative to OSP is unknown, and there are insufficient data to evaluate trends in abundance. Pygmy killer whales are not listed as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (1973), nor designated as “depleted” under the MMPA. Given the absence of recent recorded fishery-related mortality or serious injuries, the total fishery mortality and serious injury can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero. One pygmy killer whale stranded in the MHI has tested positive for *Morbillivirus* (Jacob *et al.* 2016). The presence of *morbillivirus* in 10 species of cetacean in Hawaiian waters, all identified as a unique strain of *morbillivirus*, (Jacob *et al.* 2016), raises concerns about the history and prevalence of this disease in Hawaii and the potential population impacts, including cumulative impacts of disease with other stressors.

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