HARBOR PORPOISE (*Phocoena phocoena*): Gulf of Alaska Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

In the eastern North Pacific Ocean, the harbor porpoise ranges from Point Barrow, along the Alaska coast, and down the west coast of North America to Point Conception, California (Gaskin 1984). The harbor porpoise primarily frequents coastal waters. Relatively high densities of harbor porpoise have been recorded along the coasts of Washington and northern Oregon and California. Relative to the waters off the U. S. West Coast, harbor porpoise do not occur in high densities in Alaska waters (Dahlheim et al. submitted). Stock discreteness in the eastern North Pacific was analyzed using mitochondrial DNA from samples collected along the west coast (Rosel 1992) and is summarized in Osmek et al. (1994). Two distinct mitochondrial DNA groupings or clades exist. One clade is present in California, Washington, British Columbia and Alaska (no samples were available from Oregon), while the other is found only in California and Washington. Although these two clades are not geographically distinct by latitude, the results may indicate a low mixing rate for harbor porpoise along the west coast of North America. Investigation of pollutant loads in harbor porpoise ranging from California to the Canadian border also suggests restricted harbor porpoise movements (Calambokidis and Barlow 1991). Further genetic testing of the same data mentioned above along with additional samples found significant genetic differences for 4 of the 6 pair-wise comparisons between the four areas investigated: California, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska (Rosel et al. 1995). These results demonstrate that harbor porpoise along the west coast of North America are not panmictic or migratory, and that movement is sufficiently restricted to evolve genetic differences. This is consistent with low movement suggested by genetic analysis of harbor porpoise specimen from the North Atlantic. Numerous stocks have been delineated with clinal differences over areas as small as the waters surrounding the British Isles. Unfortunately, no conclusions can be drawn about the genetic structure of harbor porpoise within Alaska because of insufficient samples. Only 19 samples are available from Alaska porpoise and 12 of these come from a single area (Copper River Delta). Accordingly, harbor porpoise stock structure in Alaska remains unknown at this time.

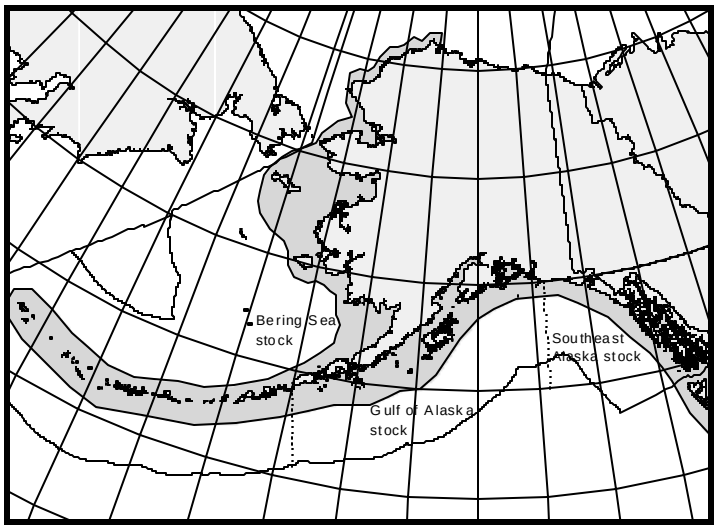

Figure 23. Approximate distribution of harbor porpoise in Alaska waters (shaded area). The distributions of all three stocks found in Alaska waters are shown.

Although it is difficult to determine the true stock structure of harbor porpoise populations in the northeast Pacific, from a management standpoint, it would be prudent to assume that regional populations exist and that they should be managed independently (Rosel et al. 1995, Taylor et al. 1996). The Alaska SRG concurred that while the available data were insufficient to justify recognizing three biological stocks of harbor porpoise in Alaska, it did not recommend against the establishment of three management units in Alaska (DeMaster 1996, 1997). Accordingly, from the above information, three separate harbor porpoise stocks in Alaska are recommended, recognizing that the boundaries were set arbitrarily: 1) the Southeast Alaska stock - occurring from the northern border of British Columbia border to Cape Suckling, Alaska, 2) the Gulf of Alaska stock - occurring from Cape Suckling to Unimak Pass, and 3) the Bering Sea stock - occurring throughout the Aleutian Islands and all waters north of Unimak Pass (Fig. 23). Information concerning the 4 harbor porpoise stocks occurring along the U. S. West Coast (central California, northern California, Oregon/Washington Coast, and Inland Washington) can be found in the Stock Assessment Reports for the Pacific Region.

POPULATION SIZE

In June and July of 1998 an aerial survey covering the waters of the western Gulf of Alaska from Cape Suckling to Sutwik Island, offshore to the 1,000 fathom depth contour resulted in a corrected abundance estimate for the Gulf of Alaska harbor porpoise stock of 21,451 (CV=0.309) animals. The uncorrected abundance estimate (7,247 CV=0.252) was adjusted for availability bias using the Laake et al. (1997) value of 2.96 (CV=0.180) (i.e, 7,247 x 2.96=21,451). The previous SAR for this stock used the Calambokidis et al. (1993) 3.1 (CV=0.171) correction factor for both perception and availability bias, based on work in Puget Sound, Washington. A perception bias was estimated within the most recent survey, however, so only a correction for availability bias was necessary. The Barlow et al. (1988) correction factor of 3.2 was not used because it includes untested assumptions regarding observer behavior and visibility of harbor porpoise during surfacing intervals which though reasonable are not necessary in the treatment of Laake et al. (1997).

The latest estimate of abundance (21,451; CV=0.309) is based on surveys conducted in 1998, and is considerably higher than the previous estimate in the 1999 SAR (8,271; CV=0.309). This disparity largely stems from changes in the area covered by the two surveys and differences in harbor porpoise density encountered in areas added to, or dropped from, the 1998 survey, relative to the 1991-93 surveys . The survey area in 1998 (119,183 km^2) was greater than the area covered in the composited portions of the 1991,1992 and 1993 surveys (106,600 km^2). The 1998 survey included the waters of Prince William Sound, the bays, channels, and inlets of the Kenai Peninsula, the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Archipelago whereas the earlier survey included only open water areas. Several of the bays and inlets covered by the 1998 survey had higher harbor porpoise densities than observed in the open waters. The earlier survey also included Cook Inlet, a low density harbor porpoise area, which was not included in the 1998 survey. The 1998 aerial survey resulted in an uncorrected abundance estimate of 7,247 (CV=0.252) compared to 2,741 (CV=0.134) in 1993. The 1998 survey result is probably more representative of the size of the Gulf of Alaska harbor porpoise stock since it included more of the inshore habitat commonly used by harbor porpoise.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) for this stock is calculated using Equation 1 from the PBR Guidelines (Wade and Angliss 1997): $N_{MIN} = N/\exp(0.842*[\ln(1+[CV(N)]^2)]^{½})$. Using the population estimate (N) of 21,451 and its associated CV of 0.309, N_{MIN} for the Gulf of Alaska stock of harbor porpoise is 16,630.

Current Population Trend

At present, there is no reliable information on trends in abundance for the Gulf of Alaska stock of harbor porpoise.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) is not currently available for the Gulf of Alaska stock of harbor porpoise. Hence, until additional data become available, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate of 4% be employed (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 re-authorized Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the potential biological removal (PBR) is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock is 0.5, the value for cetacean stocks with unknown population status (Wade and Angliss 1997). Thus, for the Gulf of Alaska stock of harbor porpoise, PBR = 166 animals (16,630 x 0.02 x 0.5).

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Three different commercial fisheries operating within the range of the Gulf of Alaska stock of harbor porpoise were monitored for incidental take by NMFS observers during 1990-95: Gulf of Alaska groundfish trawl, longline, and pot fisheries. No incidental mortality of harbor porpoise was observed in these fisheries. Observers also monitored the Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet fishery in 1990 and 1991, recording 1 mortality in 1990 and 3 mortalities in 1991. These

mortalities extrapolated to 8 (95% CI 1-23) and 32 (95% CI 3-103) kills for the entire fishery, resulting in a mean kill rate of 20 (CV=0.60) animals per year for 1990 and 1991. In 1990, observers boarded 300 (57.3%) of the 524 vessels that fished in the Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet fishery, monitoring a total of 3,166 sets, or roughly 4% of the estimated number of sets made by the fleet (Wynne et al. 1991). In 1991, observers boarded 531 (86.9%) of the 611 registered vessels and monitored a total of 5,875 sets, or roughly 5% of the estimated sets made by the fleet (Wynne et al. 1992). Logbook reports from this fishery detail 6, 5, 6, and 1 harbor porpoise mortalities in 1990, 1991, 1992, and 1993, respectively. The extrapolated (estimated) observer mortality accounts for these mortalities, so they do not appear in Table 21. The Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet fishery has not been observed since 1991; therefore, no additional data are available for that fishery.

An additional source of information on the number of harbor porpoise mortalities incidental to commercial fishing operations is the self-reported fisheries information required of vessel operators by the MMPA. During the period between 1990 and 1998, fisher self- reports from 2 unobserved fisheries (see Table 21) resulted in an annual mean of 4.5 mortalities from interactions with commercial fishing gear. In 1990, logbook records from the Cook Inlet set and drift gillnet fisheries were combined. As it is not possible to determine which fishery was responsible for the harbor porpoise mortalities reported in 1990, both fisheries have been included in Table 21. In 1990, observers also boarded 59 (38.3%) of the 154 vessels participating in the Alaska Peninsula/Aleutian Island salmon drift gillnet fishery, monitoring a total of 373 sets, or roughly 4% of the estimated number of sets made by the fleet (Wynne et al. 1991). The low level of observer coverage for this fishery apparently missed interactions with harbor porpoise which had occurred, as logbook mortalities were reported in 1990 (see Table 21) which were not recorded by the observer program. Note that this fishery operates south of the Aleutian Islands, but had been incorrectly addressed in earlier versions of the SAR as an interaction with the Bering Sea stock of harbor porpoise. Because logbook records (i.e., fisher self-reports required during 1990-94) are most likely negatively biased (Credle et al. 1994), these are considered to be minimum estimates. These totals are based on all available fisher self- reports for Gulf of Alaska fisheries, except the Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet fishery for which observer data were presented above. Logbook data are available for part of 1989-1994, after which incidental mortality reporting requirements were modified. Under the new system, logbooks are no longer required; instead, fishers provide self-reports. Data for the 1994-95 phase-in period is fragmentary. After 1995, the level of reporting dropped dramatically, such that the records are considered incomplete and estimates of mortality based on them represent minimums (see Appendix 4 for details).

Table 21. Summary of incidental mortality of harbor porpoise (Gulf of Alaska stock) due to commercial fisheries from 1990 through 1998 and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate. Mean annual mortality in brackets represents a minimum estimate from fisher self-reports or stranding data. n/a indicates that data were not available.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Range of observer coverage	Observed mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet	90-91	obs data	4-5%	1, 3	8, 32	20 (CV=.60)
Cook Inlet salmon drift gillnet	1999	obs data		0	0	0
Cook Inlet salmon set gillnet	1999	obs data		0	0	0
Observer program total						20

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Range of observer coverage	Reported mortalities (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Cook Inlet salmon drift and set gillnet fisheries	90-98	logbooks/ self-reports	n/a	3, 0, 0, 0, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a	n/a	[$0.75]
AK Peninsula/Aleutian Island salmon drift gillnet	90-98	logbooks/ self-reports	n/a	2, 0, 1, 0, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a	n/a	[$0.75]
Kodiak salmon set gillnet	90-98	logbooks/ self-reports	n/a	8, 4, 2, 1, n/a, n/a, n/a. n/a, 1	n/a	[$3.2]
Minimum total annual mortality						$24.7

Strandings of marine mammals with fishing gear attached or with injuries caused by interactions with fishing gear are a final source of mortality data. In the period from 1990 to 1994, 12 harbor porpoise scarred with gillnet marks were discovered stranded in Prince William Sound (Copper River Delta). These stranding reports were likely the result of operations in the Prince William Sound salmon drift gillnet fishery. The extrapolated (estimated) observer mortality for this fishery accounts for these mortalities, so they do not appear in Table 21.

A reliable estimate of the mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is considered unavailable because of the absence of observer placements in several gillnet fisheries mentioned above. However, the estimated minimum annual mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is 25 based on observer data (20), and logbook reports (rounded to 5) where observer data were not available. This estimated annual mortality rate is greater than 10% of the PBR (16.6) and, therefore, cannot be considered to be insignificant and approaching a zero mortality and serious injury rate.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

Subsistence hunters in Alaska have not been reported to take from this stock of harbor porpoise.

Other Mortality

In 1995, 2 harbor porpoise were taken incidentally in subsistence gillnets, one near Homer Spit and the other near Port Graham.

STATUS OF STOCK

Harbor porpoise are not listed as "depleted" under the MMPA or listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. The lack of surveys in a significant portion of the Gulf of Alaska results in a conservative PBR for this stock. Logbook records are most likely negatively biased (Credle et al. 1994) resulting in an underestimate of incidental mortality. However, based on the best scientific information available, the estimated level of human-caused mortality and serious injury (27; 25 mortalities in commercial fisheries plus 2 in subsistence gillnets) is not known to exceed the PBR (166). Therefore, the Gulf of Alaska stock of harbor porpoise is not classified as a strategic stock. Population trends and status of this stock relative to OSP are currently unknown.

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