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KILLER WHALE (*Orcinus orca*): AT1 Transient Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Killer whales have been observed in all oceans and seas of the world (Leatherwood and Dahlheim 1978). Although reported from tropical and offshore waters, killer whales occur at higher densities in colder and more productive waters of both hemispheres, with the greatest densities found at high latitudes (Mitchell 1975, Leatherwood and Dahlheim 1978, Forney and Wade 2006). Killer whales are found throughout the North Pacific. Along the west coast of North America, seasonal and year-round occurrence of killer whales has been noted along the entire Alaskan coast (Braham and Dahlheim 1982), in British Columbia and Washington inland waterways (Bigg et al. 1990), and along the outer coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California (Green et al. 1992; Barlow 1995, 1997; Forney et al. 1995). Killer whales from these areas have been labeled as "resident," "transient," and "offshore" type killer whales (Bigg et al. 1990, Ford et al. 2000, Dahlheim et al. 2008) based on aspects of morphology, ecology, genetics, and behavior (Ford and Fisher 1982; Baird and Stacey 1988; Baird et al. 1992; Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000; Dahlheim et al. 2008). Through examination of photographs of recognizable individuals and pods, movements of whales between geographical areas have been documented. For example, whales identified in Prince William Sound have been observed near Kodiak Island (Matkin et al. 1999) and whales identified in Southeast Alaska have been observed in Prince William Sound, British Columbia, and Puget Sound (Leatherwood et al. 1990, Dahlheim et al. 1997). Movements of killer whales between the waters of Southeast Alaska and central California have also been documented (Goley and Straley 1994, Black et al. 1997, Dahlheim and White 2010).

Figure 1. Approximate distribution of transient killer whales in the eastern North Pacific (shaded areas). The distribution of resident and transient killer whale stocks in the eastern North Pacific largely overlap (see text).

Several studies provide evidence that the resident, offshore, and transient ecotypes are genetically distinct in both mtDNA and nuclear DNA (Hoelzel and Dover 1991; Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000). Genetic differences have also been found between populations within the transient and resident ecotypes (Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000). A recent global genetic study of killer whales using the entire mitochondrial genome found that some killer whale ecotypes represent deeply divergent evolutionary lineages and warrant elevation to species or subspecies status (Morin et al. 2010). In particular, estimates from mitogenome sequence data indicate that transient killer whales diverged from all other killer whale lineages ~700,000 years ago. In light of these differences, the Society for Marine Mammalogy's Committee on Taxonomy currently recognizes the resident and transient North Pacific ecotypes as un-named *Orcinus orca* subspecies (Committee on Taxonomy 2012). In recognition of its status as an un-named subspecies or species, some researchers now refer to transient-type killer whales as Bigg's killer whales (e.g., Ford 2011, Riesch et al. 2012), in tribute to the late Dr. Michael Bigg.

The first studies of transient killer whales in Alaska were conducted in Southeast Alaska and in the Gulf of Alaska (from Prince William Sound, through the Kenai Fjords, and around Kodiak Island). In the Gulf of Alaska, Matkin et al. (1999) described two genetically distinct populations of transients which were never found in association with one another, the so-called "Gulf of Alaska" transients and "AT1" transients. In the past, neither of these populations were known to associate with the population of transient killer whales that ranged from California to Southeast Alaska, which are described as the West Coast Transient stock. Gulf of Alaska transients are documented throughout the Gulf of Alaska, including occasional sightings in Prince William Sound. AT1 transients have been seen only in Prince William Sound and in the Kenai Fjords region, and are therefore partially sympatric with Gulf of Alaska transients. In addition, recent data have identified 14 out of 217 transients on the outer coast of

Southeast Alaska and British Columbia as Gulf of Alaska transients and in one encounter they were observed mixing with West Coast Transients (Matkin et al. 2012, Ford et al. 2013). Transients within the Gulf of Alaska population have been found to have two mtDNA haplotypes, neither of which is found in the West Coast or AT1 populations. Members of the AT1 population share a single mtDNA haplotype. Transient killer whales from the West Coast population have been found to share a single mtDNA haplotype that is not found in the other populations. Additionally, all three populations have been found to have significant differences in nuclear (microsatellite) DNA (Barrett-Lennard 2000). Acoustic differences have been found as well; Saulitis et al. (2005) described acoustic differences between Gulf of Alaska transients and AT1 transients. For these reasons, the Gulf of Alaska transients are considered part of a population that is discrete from the AT1 population, and both of these populations are considered discrete from the West Coast Transients.

Biopsy samples from the eastern Aleutians and the south side of the west end of the Alaska Peninsula have produced the same haplotypes as killer whales in the northern Gulf of Alaska, however, nuclear DNA analysis strongly suggests they belong to a separate population (Parsons et al. 2013). The geographic distribution of mtDNA haplotypes revealed samples from the central Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea with haplotypes not found in Gulf of Alaska transients, suggesting additional population structure in western Alaska. At this time, transient-type killer whales from the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea are considered to be part of a single population that includes Gulf of Alaska transients. Killer whales observed in the northern Bering Sea and Beaufort Sea have physical characteristics of transient-type whales, but little is known about these whales. AT1 haplotype whales are also present west of the Aleutian Islands and into the Bering Sea, however, nuclear DNA analysis indicates these animals are not part of the AT1 transient population in the Gulf of Alaska (L. Barrett-Lennard, Vancouver Aquarium, pers. comm., 21 March 2014).

In summary, within the transient ecotype, association data (Ford et al. 1994, Ford and Ellis 1999, Matkin et al. 1999), acoustic data (Ford and Ellis 1999, Saulitis et al. 2005) and genetic data (Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000) confirm that at least three communities of transient whales exist and represent three discrete populations: 1) Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea transients, 2) AT1 transients, and 3) West Coast transients.

Based on data regarding association patterns, acoustics, movements, and genetic differences, eight killer whale stocks are now recognized within the Pacific U.S. EEZ: 1) the Alaska Resident stock - occurring from Southeast Alaska to the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, 2) the Northern Resident stock - occurring from Washington State through part of Southeast Alaska, 3) the Southern Resident stock - occurring mainly within the inland waters of Washington State and southern British Columbia, but also in coastal waters from Southeast Alaska through California, 4) the Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea Transient stock - occurring mainly from Prince William Sound through the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, 5) the AT1 Transient stock - occurring in Alaska from Prince William Sound through the Kenai Fjords, 6) the West Coast Transient stock - occurring from California through Southeast Alaska, 7) the Offshore stock - occurring from California through Alaska, and 8) the Hawaiian stock. Transient whales in Canadian waters are considered part of the West Coast Transient stock. The Stock Assessment Reports for the Alaska Region contain information concerning all the killer whale stocks except the Hawaiian and Offshore stocks.

AT1 killer whales were first identified as a separate, cohesive group in 1984, when 22 transient-type whales were documented in Prince William Sound (Leatherwood et al. 1984, Heise et al. 1991), though individual whales from the group had been photographed as early as 1978 (von Ziegesar et al. 1986). Once the North Gulf Oceanic Society began consistent annual research effort in Prince William Sound, AT1 killer whales were re-sighted frequently. In fact, AT1 killer whales were found to be some of the most frequently sighted killer whales in Prince William Sound (Matkin et al. 1993, 1994, 1999). Gulf of Alaska transients are seen less frequently in Prince William Sound, with periods of several years or more between resightings.

AT1 killer whales have never been seen in association with sympatric resident killer whale pods or with Gulf of Alaska transients (Matkin et al. 1999, 2012), are genetically and acoustically distinct from other transient killer whales in the North Pacific (Barrett-Lennard 2000, Saulitis et al. 2005), and appear to have a more limited range than other transients. Their approximately 200-mile range includes only Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords and adjacent offshore waters (Matkin et al. 1999, 2012).

POPULATION SIZE

Using photographic identification methods, all 22 individuals in the AT1 Transient population were censused for the first time in 1984 (Leatherwood et al. 1984). All 22 AT1s were seen annually or biannually from 1984 to 1988 (Matkin et al. 1999, 2003). The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill occurred in spring of 1989. Nine individuals from the AT1 group have been missing since 1990 (last seen in 1989), and two have been missing since 1992 (last

seen in 1990 and 1991). Three of the missing AT1s (AT5, AT7, and AT8) were seen near the leaking *Exxon Valdez* shortly after the spill (Matkin et al. 1993, 1994, 2008). Two whales were found dead, stranded in 1989-1990, both genetically assigned to the AT1 population and one visually recognized as AT19, one of the missing nine (Matkin et al. 1994, 2008; Heise et al. 2003). The second unidentified whale was most likely one of the other missing AT1 whales. Additional mortalities of four older males include whales AT1 found stranded in 2000, AT13 and AT17 missing in 2002 (one of which was thought to be the carcass from the AT1 population that was found in 2002), and AT14 missing in 2003. A genetically assigned AT1 stranded whale found in 2003 was probably AT14 but could also have been AT13 (Matkin et al. 2008). No births have occurred in this population since 1984 and none of the missing whales have been seen since 2003 and are presumed dead. There is an extremely small probability (0.4%) that AT1 killer whales that are missing for 3 years or more are still alive (Matkin et al. 2008). No AT1 whale missing for at least 4 years has ever been resighted and all 15 missing whales are presumed dead (Matkin et al. 2008). In 2014, AT2, AT3, AT4, and AT6 were observed by researchers from the North Gulf Oceanic Society; AT9, AT10, and AT18 were not seen in 2014. Although the absence of sightings of these three whales is of some concern, they are a matriline that is typically closely associated and may not have been encountered during research cruises. Their absence may be linked to their time spent around glaciers, which are not routinely surveyed. At this time, they are not considered to be dead. Therefore, the population estimate as of the summer of 2014 remains at seven whales (C. Matkin, North Gulf Oceanic Society, pers. comm., 21 March 2014). There has been no recruitment in this population since 1984 (Matkin et al. 2012).

Minimum Population Estimate

The abundance estimate of killer whales is a direct count of individually identifiable animals. Only 11 whales were seen between 1990 and 1999. Since then, four of those whales have not been seen for four or more consecutive years, so the minimum population estimate is seven whales (Matkin et al. 2008). Fourteen years of annual effort have failed to discover any whales that had not been seen previously, so there is no reason to believe there are additional whales in the population. Therefore, this minimum population estimate is the total population size.

Current Population Trend

The population counts have declined from a level of 22 whales in 1989 to 7 whales in 2014, a decline of 68%. Most of the mortalities apparently occurred in 1989-1990.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate is currently unavailable for this stock of killer whales. Studies of resident killer whale pods in the Pacific Northwest resulted in estimated population growth rates of 2.9% and 2.5% over the period from 1973 to 1987 (Olesiuk et al. 1990, Brault and Caswell 1993). Until additional stock-specific data become available, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be employed for this stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 reauthorized 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 0.1, as the stock is considered "depleted" under the MMPA and there has been no recruitment into the stock since 1984. Thus, for the AT1 killer whale stock, PBR = 0 animals ($7 \times 0.02 \times 0.1$).

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Detailed information on U.S. commercial fisheries in Alaska waters (including observer programs, observer coverage, and observed incidental takes of marine mammals) is presented in Appendices 3-6 of the Alaska Stock Assessment Reports.

The known range of the AT1 stock is limited to waters of Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords. There are no federally-managed commercial fisheries in this area. State-managed commercial fisheries prosecuted within the range of this stock, such as the Prince William Sound salmon set and drift gillnet fisheries, and various herring fisheries, are not known to incur incidental serious injury or mortality of AT1 killer whales. Several subsistence

fisheries (salmon, halibut, non-salmon finfish, and shellfish) also occur within this area, and no reports of incidental serious injury or mortality has been reported for these fisheries.

Alaska Native Subsistence/Harvest Information

There are no reports of a subsistence harvest of killer whales in Alaska or Canada.

Other Mortality

Collisions with boats may be an occasional source of mortality or serious injury of killer whales. One mortality due to a ship strike occurred in 1998 when a killer whale struck the propeller of a vessel in the Bering Sea groundfish trawl fishery; however, this mortality did not involve a whale from the AT1 stock. There has been no known mortality or serious injury of AT1 killer whales due to ship strikes. Most of the mortality occurred from 1989 to 1991 following the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

STATUS OF STOCK

The AT1 Transient stock of killer whales is below its Optimum Sustainable Population and designated as "depleted" under the MMPA; therefore, it is classified as a strategic stock. The AT1 Transient stock is not listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Based on currently available data, the estimated annual U.S. commercial fishery-related mortality and serious injury level (0) does not exceed 10% of the PBR (0) and, therefore, can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. At least 11 animals were alive in 1998, but it appears that only 7 individuals remain alive. The AT1 group has been reduced to 32% (7/22) of its 1984 level. Since no births have occurred in the past 30 years, it is unlikely that this stock will recover.

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