

PYGMY SPERM WHALE (*Kogia breviceps*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The pygmy sperm whale appears to be distributed worldwide in temperate to tropical waters (Caldwell and Caldwell 1989). Sightings of these animals in the northern Gulf of Mexico occur primarily in oceanic waters (Figure 1; Mullin *et al.* 1991; Mullin and Fulling 2004). Pygmy sperm whales and dwarf sperm whales (*Kogia sima*) are difficult to differentiate at sea, and sightings of either species are often categorized as *Kogia* sp. Sightings of this category were documented in all seasons during GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico from 1992 to 1998 (Hansen *et al.* 1996; Mullin and Hoggard 2000). The difficulty in sighting pygmy and dwarf sperm whales may be exacerbated by their avoidance reaction towards ships, and change in behavior towards approaching survey aircraft (Würsig *et al.* 1998).

In a study using hematological and stable-isotope data, Barros *et al.* (1998) speculated that dwarf sperm whales may have a more pelagic distribution than pygmy sperm whales, and/or dive deeper during feeding bouts. Diagnostic morphological characters have also been useful in distinguishing the 2 *Kogia* species (Barros and Duffield 2003), thus enabling researchers to use stranding data in distributional and ecological studies. Specifically, the distance from the snout to the center of the blowhole in proportion to the animal's total length, as well as the height of the dorsal fin, in proportion to the animal's total length, can be used to differentiate between the 2 *Kogia* species when such measurements are obtainable (Barros and Duffield 2003).

The Gulf of Mexico population is provisionally being considered a separate stock for management purposes, although there is currently no information to differentiate this stock from the Atlantic Ocean stock(s). Additional morphological, genetic and/or behavioral data are needed to provide further information on stock delineation.

POPULATION SIZE

Estimates of abundance were derived through the application of distance sampling analysis (Buckland *et al.* 2001) and the computer program DISTANCE (Thomas *et al.* 1998) to sighting data. From 1991 through 1994, line-transect vessel surveys were conducted in conjunction with bluefin tuna ichthyoplankton surveys during spring in the northern Gulf of Mexico from the 200m isobath to the seaward extent of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Hansen *et al.* 1995). Annual cetacean surveys were conducted along a fixed plankton sampling trackline. Survey effort-weighted estimated average abundance of pygmy and dwarf sperm whales for all surveys combined was 547 (CV=0.28) (Hansen *et al.* 1995).

Similar surveys were conducted during spring from 1996 to 2001 (excluding 1998) in oceanic waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico. Due to limited survey effort in any given year, survey effort was pooled across all years to develop an average abundance estimate. The estimate of abundance for pygmy and dwarf sperm whales in oceanic waters, pooled from 1996 to 2001, was 742 (CV=0.29) (Mullin and Fulling 2004). A separate estimate of abundance for pygmy sperm whales could not be estimated due to uncertainty of species identification at sea.

During summer 2003 and spring 2004, line-transect surveys dedicated to estimating the abundance of oceanic cetaceans were conducted in the northern Gulf of Mexico. During each year, a grid of uniformly-spaced transect lines

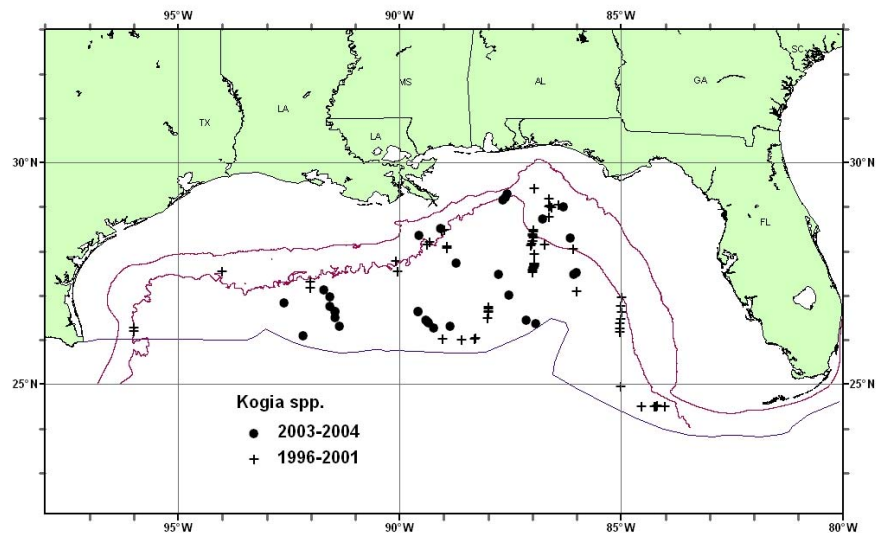


Figure 1. Distribution of pygmy and dwarf sperm whale sightings from SEFSC spring vessel surveys during 1996-2001 and from summer 2003 and spring 2004 surveys. All the on-effort sightings are shown, though not all were used to estimate abundance. Solid lines indicate the 100m and 1,000m isobaths and the offshore extent of the U.S. EEZ.

from a random start were surveyed from the 200m isobath to the seaward extent of the U.S. EEZ using NOAA Ship *Gordon Gunter* (Mullin 2007).

As recommended in the GAMMS Workshop Report (Wade and Angliss 1997), estimates older than 8 years are deemed unreliable, and therefore should not be used for PBR determinations. Because most of the data for estimates prior to 2003 were older than this 8-year limit and due to the different sampling strategies, estimates from the 2003 and 2004 surveys were considered most reliable. The estimate of abundance for pygmy and dwarf sperm whales in oceanic waters, pooled from 2003 to 2004, was 453 (CV=0.35) (Mullin 2007), which is the best available abundance estimate for these species in the northern Gulf of Mexico.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for pygmy and dwarf sperm whales is 453 (CV=0.35). It is not possible to determine the minimum population estimate for only pygmy sperm whales. The minimum population estimate for the northern Gulf of Mexico is 340 pygmy and dwarf sperm whales.

Current Population Trend

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this species due to uncertainty in species identification at sea. The pooled abundance estimate for *Kogia* spp. for 2003-2004 of 453 (CV=0.35) and that for 1996-2001 of 742 (CV=0.29) are not significantly different ($P>0.05$), but due to the precision of the estimates, the power to detect a difference is low. The abundance estimate for *Kogia* spp. for 1991-1994 was 547 (CV=0.28). These temporal abundance estimates are difficult to interpret without a Gulf of Mexico-wide understanding of *Kogia* abundance. The Gulf of Mexico is composed of waters belonging to the U.S., Mexico and Cuba. U.S. waters only comprise about 40% of the entire Gulf of Mexico, and 65% of oceanic waters are south of the U.S. EEZ. The oceanography of the Gulf of Mexico is quite dynamic, and the spatial scale of the Gulf is small relative to the ability of most cetacean species to travel. Studies based on abundance and distribution surveys restricted to U.S. waters are unable to detect temporal shifts in distribution beyond U.S. waters that might account for any changes in abundance.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. For purposes of this assessment, the maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.04. This value is based on theoretical modeling showing that cetacean populations may not grow at rates much greater than 4% given the constraints of their reproductive history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal level (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate and a recovery factor (MMPA Sec. 3.16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size for pygmy and dwarf sperm whales is 340. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The “recovery” factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP), is assumed to be 0.5 because the stock is of unknown status. PBR for the northern Gulf of Mexico pygmy and dwarf sperm whales is 3.4. It is not possible to determine the PBR for only pygmy sperm whales.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

There has been no reported fishing-related mortality of dwarf or pygmy sperm whales during 1998-2005 (Yeung 1999; Yeung 2001; Garrison 2003; Garrison and Richards 2004; Garrison 2005; Fairfield Walsh and Garrison 2006).

Fisheries Information

The level of past or current, direct, human-caused mortality of dwarf sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico is unknown. Pelagic swordfish, tunas and billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico. There were no reports of mortality or serious injury to dwarf sperm whales by this fishery.

Other Mortality

At least 15 pygmy sperm whale strandings were documented in the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1999-2005 (Table 1 displays 2001-2005 data; 13 showed no signs of human interaction and 2 were designated “could not be determined”). Two animals mass stranded in Florida during January 2001. An additional 7 *Kogia* spp. stranded during 1999-2005 (2 in TX in 2000, 1 in TX in 2001, 2 in TX in 2002, 1 in MS in 2003, and 1 in FL in 2004). Stranding data probably

underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the marine mammals which die or are seriously injured in fishery interactions wash ashore, not all that wash ashore are discovered, reported or investigated, nor will all of those that do wash ashore necessarily show signs of entanglement or other fishery interaction. Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of fishery interactions.

STATE	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	TOTAL
Alabama	0	0	0	0	0	0
Florida	2 ^a	2	3	1	0	8
Louisiana	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mississippi	0	0	0	0	0	0
Texas	1	2	1	0	2	6
TOTAL	3	4	4	1	2	14

a Florida mass stranding of 2 animals in January 2001

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of pygmy sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico, relative to OSP, is unknown. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this species. The total level of U.S. Gulf of Mexico fishery-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock is unknown, but assumed to be less than 10% of the calculated PBR and can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. This is not a strategic stock because average annual fishery-related mortality and serious injury does not exceed PBR. However, the continuing inability to distinguish between species of *Kogia* raises concerns about the possibility of mortalities of one stock or the other exceeding PBR.

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