

## COMMON BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops truncatus truncatus*) Northern Georgia/Southern South Carolina Estuarine System Stock

### STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The coastal morphotype of common bottlenose dolphins is continuously distributed along the Atlantic coast south of Long Island, New York, to the Florida peninsula, including inshore waters of the bays, sounds and estuaries. Several lines of evidence support a distinction between dolphins inhabiting coastal waters near the shore and those present in the inshore waters of the bays, sounds and estuaries. Photo-identification (photo-ID) and genetic studies support the existence of resident estuarine animals in several areas (Caldwell 2001; Gubbins 2002a; Zolman 2002; Gubbins *et al.* 2003; Mazzoil *et al.* 2005; Litz *et al.* 2012), and similar patterns have been observed in bays and estuaries along the Gulf of Mexico coast (Wells *et al.* 1987; Balmer *et al.* 2008). Recent genetic analyses using both mitochondrial DNA and nuclear microsatellite markers found significant differentiation between animals biopsied in coastal and estuarine areas along the Atlantic coast (Rosel *et al.* 2009), and between those biopsied in coastal and estuarine waters at the same latitude (NMFS unpublished data). Similar results have been found off the west coast of Florida (Sellas *et al.* 2005).

Estuarine areas in southern South Carolina and northern Georgia are characterized by extensive tidal marshes, shallow lagoonal estuaries, and riverine input (Savannah, Coosawhatchie, Combahee Rivers). Estuarine circulation patterns are dominated mainly by freshwater inflow and tides in South Carolina and Georgia. This region includes the large population centers of Savannah, Georgia, and Hilton Head, South Carolina, which are also areas of significant tourism.

From 1994 to 1998, Gubbins (2002a,b,c) surveyed an area around Hilton Head Island bordered on the north by the May River, on the south by the Calibogue Sound, on the west by

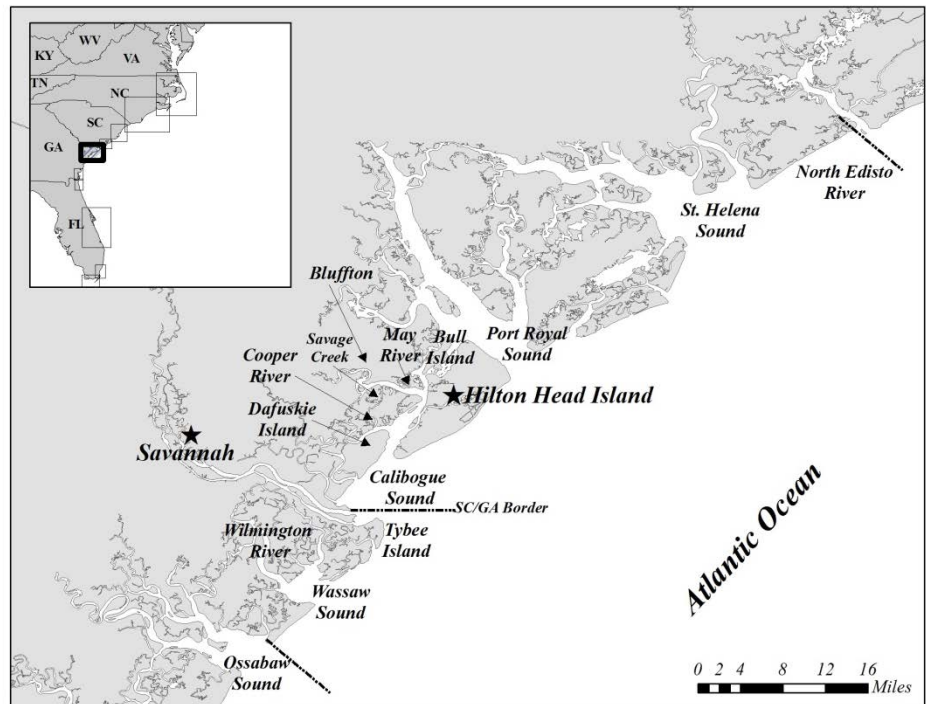


Figure 1. Geographic extent of the Northern Georgia/Southern South Carolina Estuarine System (NGSSCES) stock. The borders are denoted by dashed lines.

Savage Creek and on the east by Hilton Head Island. Broad Creek, which bisects Hilton Head Island, and nearshore ocean waters out to 2 km at the mouth of Calibogue Sound were included and were regularly surveyed. Occasional surveys were made around the perimeter of Hilton Head Island. Gubbins (2002b) categorized each dolphin identified in the Hilton Head area as a year-round resident or a seasonal transient based on overall resighting patterns. Residents were seen in all 4 seasons whereas transients were seen only in 1 or 2 seasons. Resident dolphins were observed from 10 to 116 times, whereas transients were observed less than 9 times (Gubbins 2002b). Sixty-four percent of the dolphins photographically identified were resighted only once between 1994 and 1998. Both resident and transient dolphins occurred in the waters of Calibogue Sound (Gubbins 2002b,c; Gubbins *et al.* 2003), whereas in the tidal creeks and rivers, primarily small, tight groups of resident dolphins were seen, with only an

occasional transient dolphin. Two dolphins were resighted between Hilton Head and Jacksonville, which likely represent transients or seasonal residents (Gubbins 2002b). Gubbins *et al.* (2003) reported dolphin abundance in the Hilton Head area was lowest from February to April, with 2 peaks in abundance observed in May and July. Some dolphins were sighted for short periods in the summer, indicating transients or seasonal residents may move inshore to this area during the summer months.

The Northern Georgia/Southern South Carolina Estuarine System (NGSSCES) Stock is bounded to the north by the southern border of the Charleston Estuarine System Stock at the southern extent of the North Edisto River and extends southwestward to the northern extent of Ossabaw Sound. It includes St. Helena, Port Royal, Calibogue and Wassaw Sounds, as well as the estuarine waters of the rivers and creeks and 1 km of nearshore coastal waters that lie within this area (Figure 1). Photo-ID matches of estuarine animals from the NGSSCES region and the estuarine stocks to the north and south have not been made (Urian *et al.* 1999). The borders are based primarily on results of photo-ID studies conducted by Gubbins (2002a,b,c) in this region, and photo-ID and telemetry research carried out north of this region (Zolman 2002; Speakman *et al.* 2006), and are subject to change upon further study of dolphin residency patterns in estuarine waters of South Carolina and Georgia.

Dolphins residing within estuaries south of this stock down to the northern boundary of the Southern Georgia Estuarine System (SGES) Stock are currently not included in any Stock Assessment Report. There are insufficient data to determine whether animals south of the NGSSCES Stock exhibit affiliation to the NGSSCES Stock, to the SGES Stock to the south, or should be delimited as a separate stock. Further research is needed to establish affinities of dolphins in this region. It should be noted, however, that in this intervening region during 2007-2011, 12 stranded dolphins were reported. It could not be determined if there was evidence of human interactions for 10 of these stranded animals, and for 1 animal no evidence of human interactions was detected. One animal was disentangled from commercial blue crab pot gear and released alive without serious injury (Maze-Foley and Garrison in prep.).

## **POPULATION SIZE**

The total number of bottlenose dolphins residing within the NGSSCES Stock is unknown. Data collected by Gubbins (2002b) were incorporated into a larger study that used mark-recapture analyses to calculate abundance in 4 estuarine areas along the eastern U.S. coast (Gubbins *et al.* 2003). Sighting records collected only from May through October were used. Based on photo-ID data from 1994 to 1998, 234 individually identified dolphins were observed (Gubbins *et al.* 2003), which included 52 year-round residents and an unspecified number of seasonal residents and transients. Mark-recapture analyses included all the 234 individually identifiable dolphins and the population size for the Hilton Head area was calculated to be 525 dolphins (CV=0.16; Gubbins *et al.* 2003). This was an overestimate of the stock abundance within the study area covered by Gubbins *et al.* (2003) because it included non-resident and seasonally resident dolphins. In addition, the study area did not encompass the entire area occupied by the NGSSCES Stock and therefore this population size cannot be considered a reliable estimate of abundance for this stock. Finally, as recommended in the GAMMS Workshop Report (Wade and Angliss 1997), estimates greater than 8 years old are deemed unreliable.

### **Minimum Population Estimate**

The minimum population estimate for this stock of bottlenose dolphins is unknown. Present data are insufficient to calculate a minimum population estimate for the Northern Georgia/Southern South Carolina Estuarine System Stock of bottlenose dolphins.

### **Current Population Trend**

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock.

## **CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES**

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. 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 life history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

## **POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL**

Potential Biological Removal (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate and a “recovery” factor (MMPA Sec. 3. 16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size of the NGSSCES Stock is unknown. 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 this stock is of unknown status. PBR for the NGSSCES Stock of bottlenose dolphins is unknown.

### **ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY**

The total annual human-caused mortality and serious injury within the NGSSCES Stock during 2007-2011 is unknown. Interactions were documented with crab pot gear and hook and line gear; however, it is not possible to estimate the total number of interactions or mortalities associated with crab pots or hook and line fisheries since there are no systematic observer programs.

#### **New Serious Injury Guidelines**

NMFS updated its serious injury designation and reporting process, which uses guidance from previous serious injury workshops, expert opinion, and analysis of historic injury cases to develop new criteria for distinguishing serious from non-serious injury (Angliss and DeMaster 1998; Andersen *et al.* 2008; NOAA 2012). NMFS defines serious injury as an “injury that is more likely than not to result in mortality”. Injury determinations for stock assessments revised in 2013 or later incorporate the new serious injury guidelines, based on the most recent 5-year period for which data are available.

#### **Fishery Information**

There is a potential for the NGSSCES stock to interact with the Category II Atlantic blue crab trap/pot fishery and the Category III Atlantic commercial passenger fishing vessel (hook and line) fishery (Appendix III).

#### **Crab Pots**

One of the largest commercial fisheries in South Carolina’s coastal waters is the Atlantic blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) fishery, which operates year round with the predominant fishing occurring from August to November. Burdett and McFee (2004) reviewed bottlenose dolphin strandings in South Carolina from 1992 to 2003 and found that 24% of the 42 entanglements of dolphins were associated with crab pots with an additional 19% of known entanglements deemed as probable interactions with crab pots.

Between 2007 and 2011, 5 bottlenose dolphin strandings were reported entangled in crab pot gear in the NGSSCES (Table 1; NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database unpublished data, accessed 13 September 2012). Three of the 5 strandings were mortalities. Two of the 5 animals were released alive, 1 of which was considered without serious injury and the other was considered seriously injured (Maze-Foley and Garrison in prep.). For 2 cases the pot gear was identified as commercial blue crab, for 1 case it was identified as illegal, for 1 case it was identified as recreational, and the remaining case was unidentified as to pot gear type.

#### **Hook and Line Fisheries**

During 2010 in the NGSSCES area, 1 dolphin was documented with monofilament line wrapped around its flukes and 1 dolphin was documented with an ingested fishing lure. Both of these mortalities were included in the stranding database and are included in the stranding totals presented in Table 1.

#### **Other Mortality**

From 2007 to 2011, 81 bottlenose dolphin strandings were documented within the NGSSCES area (Table 1; NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database unpublished data, accessed 13 September 2012). There was evidence of human interactions for 14 strandings in total, 10 of which were fisheries interactions including the 5 interactions with crab pot gear and 2 interactions with hook and line gear discussed above. No evidence of human interactions was found for 25 strandings, and for the remaining 42 strandings, it could not be determined if there was evidence of human interactions. In addition to animals included in the stranding database, in 2009 there was an at-sea observation of a dolphin entangled in a crab pot buoy and line, and this animal was considered seriously injured (Maze-Foley and Garrison in prep.).

Stranding data underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the marine mammals that die or are seriously injured in fishery interactions are discovered, reported or investigated, nor will all of those that are found 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.

An Unusual Mortality Event (UME) was declared in South Carolina during February-May 2011. Twelve strandings assigned to the NGSSCES Stock were considered to be part of the UME. The cause of this UME is still under investigation.

Table 1. Bottlenose dolphin strandings occurring in the Northern Georgia/Southern South Carolina Estuarine System Stock area during 2007 to 2011, as well as number of strandings for which evidence of human interactions (HI) was detected and number of strandings for which it could not be determined (CBD) if there was evidence of human interactions. Data are from the NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database (unpublished data, accessed 13 September 2012). Please note human interaction does not necessarily mean the interaction caused the animal's death.

| Stock   | Category          | 2007 | 2008           | 2009           | 2010           | 2011            | Total |
|---|-------------------|------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-------|
| Northern Georgia/Southern South Carolina Estuarine System Stock | Total Stranded    | 13   | 11             | 9              | 21             | 27 <sup>d</sup> | 81    |
|   | Human Interaction |      |                |                |                |                 |       |
|   | ---Yes            | 0    | 2 <sup>a</sup> | 3 <sup>b</sup> | 6 <sup>c</sup> | 3 <sup>e</sup>  | 14    |
|   | ---No             | 5    | 2              | 1              | 10             | 7               | 25    |
|   | ---CBD            | 8    | 7              | 5              | 5              | 17              | 42    |

<sup>a</sup> These HIs were 2 fisheries interactions (FIs), 1 of which was an animal disentangled from commercial blue crab pot gear and released alive without serious injury.

<sup>b</sup> This HI "Yes" total includes 2 FIs, 1 of which was an animal partially disentangled from recreational pot gear by a member of the public and released alive in unknown condition.

<sup>c</sup> These HIs were 5 FIs and 1 boat collision. Two of the FIs were mortalities resulting from entanglements in crab pot gear. One of the crab trap interactions involved illegal gear. Two FIs involved hook and line gear.

<sup>d</sup> This total includes 12 animals that were part of the 2011 UME event in South Carolina.

<sup>e</sup> These HIs include 1 animal with a bullet found inside (gunshot; likely occurred post-mortem), 1 animal mutilated post-mortem, and 1 mortality resulting from an entanglement in commercial blue crab pot gear.

This stock inhabits areas with significant drainage from urban and agricultural areas and as such is exposed to contaminants in runoff from those sources. There is no estimate of indirect human-caused mortality from pollution or habitat degradation for this stock. However, high tissue concentrations of anthropogenic contaminants are likely to have an effect on reproduction and population health (Hansen *et al.* 2004; Schwacke *et al.* 2004; Reif *et al.* 2008).

Blubber samples were collected from 7 bottlenose dolphins in the Turtle/Brunswick River Estuary (TBRE) and dolphins stranded in Wassaw, Ossabaw and St. Catherine's Sounds (Pulser and Maruya 2008). Total PCB concentrations were 10 times higher in dolphins from the TBRE compared to the stranded animals from the Savannah area. The signature of Aroclor 1268, a PCB used in roofing and caulking compounds, was distinct between the TBRE and Savannah area dolphins and closely resembled those of local prey fish species (Pulser and Maruya 2008).

Gubbins (2002c) speculated that the most serious threat to Hilton Head dolphins is illegal feeding of dolphins. Provisioned dolphins spend more time alone and in smaller groups, leaving them vulnerable to shark attacks, more aggressive with each other in an attempt to get free food, and less wary of humans. They are also at more risk of injury or death from boat propellers, entanglement in or ingestion of fishing gear, eating spoiled fish, or retaliation, such as shooting. There are emerging questions regarding potential linkages between provisioning wild dolphins, dolphin depredation of recreational fishing gear, and associated entanglement and ingestion of gear (Powell and Wells 2011). High boat activity in the Hilton Head area could result in a change in movement patterns, alteration of behavior of both dolphins and their prey, disruption of echolocation and masking of communication, physical damage to ears, collisions with vessels and degradation of habitat quality (Richardson *et al.* 1995; Ketten 1998; Gubbins 2002b; Gubbins *et al.* 2003; Mattson *et al.* 2005). The effect of boat and jet ski activity was investigated by Mattson *et al.* (2005) during the summer of 1998 along Hilton Head Island. Dolphins changed behavior more often when boats were present, and group size was significantly larger in the presence of 1 boat and was largest when multiple boats were present. Jet skis elicited a strong and immediate reaction with dolphins remaining below the surface for long periods of time. Dolphins always changed behavior and direction of movement in the presence of shrimp boats, while ships and ferries elicited little to no obvious response. The long-term impacts of such repeated harassment and disturbance on survival and reproduction remain to be determined.

## STATUS OF STOCK

Bottlenose dolphins in the western North Atlantic are not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. However, because the abundance of the NGSSCES Stock is currently unknown, but likely small, and relatively few mortalities and serious injuries would exceed PBR, NMFS considers this to be a strategic

stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The documented annual average human-caused mortality for this stock for 2007 – 2011 ranges between 1.0 and 1.4. However, there are several commercial fisheries, including crab trap/pot fisheries, operating within this stock's boundaries and these fisheries have little to no observer coverage. The impact of crab trap/pot fisheries on estuarine bottlenose dolphins is currently unknown, but has been shown previously to be considerable in the similar Charleston Estuarine System Stock area (Burdett and McFee 2004). Therefore, the documented mortalities must be considered minimum estimates of total fishery-related mortality. There is insufficient information available to determine whether the total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is insignificant and approaching a zero mortality and serious injury rate. The status of this stock relative to OSP in the U.S. Atlantic EEZ is unknown. There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock.

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