

## **KILLER WHALE (*Orcinus orca*): Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident 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 prefer the colder waters of both hemispheres, with greatest abundances found within 800 km of major continents (Mitchell 1975). Along the west coast of North America, killer whales occur 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). Seasonal and year-round occurrence has been noted for killer whales throughout Alaska (Braham and Dahlheim 1982) and in the intracoastal waterways of British Columbia and Washington State, where pods have been labeled as 'resident,' 'transient,' and 'offshore' (Bigg et al. 1990, Ford et al. 1994) 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). 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).



**Figure 1.** Approximate distribution of the Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident killer whale stock (shaded area).

Studies on mtDNA restriction patterns provide evidence that the 'resident' and 'transient' types are genetically distinct (Stevens et al. 1989, Hoelzel 1991, Hoelzel and Dover 1991, Hoelzel et al. 1998). Analysis of 73 samples collected from eastern North Pacific killer whales from California to Alaska has demonstrated significant genetic differences among 'transient' whales from California through Alaska, 'resident' whales from the inland waters of Washington, and 'resident' whales ranging from British Columbia to the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea (Hoelzel et al. 1998). Most sightings of the Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock of killer whales have occurred in inland waters of Washington and southern British Columbia. However, pods belonging to this stock have also been sighted in coastal waters off Vancouver Island and Washington (Bigg et al. 1990, Ford et al. 2000), as far south as Grays Harbor (Bigg et al. 1990), and members of two pods were observed in Monterey Bay, California, in January 2000 (N. Black, pers. comm.).

Based on data regarding association patterns, acoustics, movements, genetic differences and potential fishery interactions, five killer whale stocks are recognized within the Pacific U.S. EEZ: 1) the Eastern North Pacific Northern Resident stock - occurring from British Columbia through Alaska, 2) the Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock - occurring mainly within the inland waters of Washington State and southern British Columbia, but also in coastal waters from British Columbia through California (see Fig. 1), 3) the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock - occurring from Alaska through California, 4) the Eastern North Pacific Offshore stock - occurring from Southeast Alaska through California, and 5) the Hawaiian stock. The Stock Assessment Reports for the Alaska Region contain information concerning the Eastern North Pacific Northern Resident stock.

### **POPULATION SIZE**

The Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock is a trans-boundary stock including killer whales in inland Washington and southern British Columbia waters. Photo-identification of individual whales through the years has resulted in a substantial understanding of this stock's structure, behaviors, and movements. In 1993, the three pods

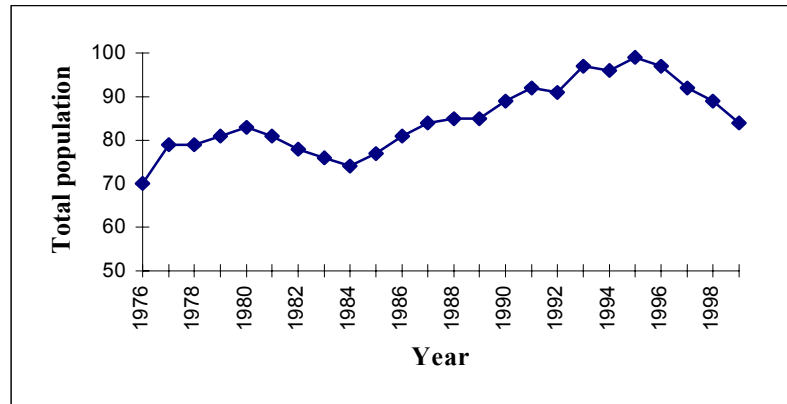
comprising this stock totaled 96 killer whales (Ford et al. 1994). The population increased to 99 whales in 1995, then declined to the current population of 84 whales in 1999 (Fig. 2; Ford et al. 2000).

### Minimum Population Estimate

The abundance estimate for this stock of killer whales is a direct count of individually identifiable animals. Other estimates of the overall population size (i.e.,  $N_{BEST}$ ) and associated  $CV(N)$  are not currently available. Thus, the minimum population estimate ( $N_{MIN}$ ) for the Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock of killer whales is 84 animals.

### Current Population Trend

During the live-capture fishery that existed from 1967 to 1973, it is estimated that 47 killer whales, mostly immature, were taken out of this stock (Ford et al. 1994). The first complete census of this stock occurred in 1974. Between 1974 and 1993 the Southern Resident stock increased approximately 35%, from 71 to 96 individuals (Ford et al. 1994). This represents a net annual growth rate of 1.8% during those years. Since 1995, the population has declined to 84 whales (Ford et al. 2000). A



**Figure 2.** Population of Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock of killer whales, 1976-1999. Each year's count includes animals first seen and first missed; a whale is considered first missed the year after it was last seen alive (Ford et al. 2000).

Southern Resident Killer Whale Workshop, sponsored by the AFSC's National Marine Mammal Laboratory (NMML), the Center for Whale Research, Six Flags Marine World Vallejo, and The Whale Museum, was held at the NMML in Seattle, WA, on 1-2 April 2000. Workshop participants discussed possible factors influencing killer whale populations including contaminant levels (Ross et al. 2000; G. Ylitalo, pers. comm.), whale-watching activities, and the availability of prey resources (NMML 2000).

### 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 British Columbia and Washington waters resulted in estimated population growth rates of 2.92% and 2.54% over the period from 1973 to 1987 (Olesiuk et al. 1990, Brault and Caswell 1993). However, a population increases at the maximum growth rate ( $R_{MAX}$ ) only when the population is at extremely low levels; thus, the estimate of 2.92% is not considered a reliable estimate of  $R_{MAX}$ . Hence, until additional 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

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (84) 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 cetacean stock of unknown status, Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 0.8 whales per year.

### HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

#### Fisheries Information

NMFS observers have monitored the northern Washington marine set gillnet fishery since 1988 (Gearin et al. 1994, 2000; P. Gearin, unpubl. data); 1994 observer data recently became available and will be included in a future stock assessment report. Observer coverage ranged from approximately 40 to 98% in the entire fishery (coastal + inland waters) between 1993 and 1998. Data from 1993 to 1998 are included in Table 1, although the mean estimated annual mortality is calculated using only the most recent 5 years for which data are available. No killer whale mortalities have been recorded in this fishery since the inception of the observer program.

In 1993, as a pilot for future observer programs, NMFS in conjunction with the Washington Department of

Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) monitored all non-treaty components of the Washington Puget Sound Region salmon gillnet fishery (Pierce et al. 1994). Observer coverage was 1.3% overall, ranging from 0.9% to 7.3% for the various components of the fishery. Encounters (whales within 10 m of a net) with killer whales were reported, but not quantified, though no entanglements occurred.

In 1994, NMFS and WDFW conducted an observer program during the Puget Sound non-treaty chum salmon gillnet fishery (areas 10/11 and 12/12B). A total of 230 sets were observed during 54 boat trips, representing approximately 11% observer coverage of the 500 fishing boat trips comprising the total effort in this fishery, as estimated from fish ticket landings (Erstad et al. 1996). No interactions with killer whales were observed during this fishery. The Puget Sound treaty chum salmon gillnet fishery in Hood Canal (areas 12, 12B, and 12C) and Puget Sound treaty sockeye/chum gillnet fishery in the Strait of Juan de Fuca (areas 4B, 5, and 6C) were also monitored in 1994 at 2.2% (based on % of total catch observed) and approximately 7.5% (based on % of observed trips to total landings) observer coverage, respectively (NWIFC 1995). No interactions resulting in killer whale mortalities were reported in either treaty salmon gillnet fishery.

Also in 1994, NMFS, WDFW, and the Tribes conducted an observer program to examine seabird and marine mammal interactions with the Puget Sound treaty and non-treaty sockeye salmon gillnet fishery (areas 7 and 7A). During this fishery, observers monitored 2,205 sets, representing approximately 7% of the estimated number of sets in the fishery (Pierce et al. 1996). Killer whales were observed within 10 m of the gear during 10 observed sets (32 animals in all), though none were observed to have been entangled.

An additional source of information on the number of killer whales killed or injured incidental to commercial fishery operations is the self-reported fisheries information required of vessel operators by the MMPA. During the period between 1994 and 1998, there were no fisher self-reports of killer whale mortalities from any fisheries operating within the range of this stock. However, because logbook records (fisher self-reports required during 1990-94) are most likely negatively biased (Credle et al. 1994), these are considered to be minimum estimates. Self-reported fisheries data are incomplete for 1994, not available for 1995, and considered unreliable after 1995 (see Appendix 4 of Hill and DeMaster 1998).

**Table 1.** Summary of incidental mortality of killer whales (Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock) due to commercial and tribal fisheries and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate; n/a indicates that data are not available. Mean annual takes are based on 1994-98 data unless noted otherwise.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Percent observer coverage	Observed mortality	Estimated mortality	Mean annual takes (CV in parentheses)
Northern WA marine set gillnet (tribal fishery: coastal + inland waters)	93	obs data	61%	0	0	0 <sup>1</sup>
	94		n/a	n/a	n/a	
	95		87%	0	0	
	96		59%	0	0	
	97		98%	0	0	
	98		40%	0	0	
WA Puget Sound Region salmon set/drift gillnet (observer programs listed below covered segments of this fishery):	-	-	-	-	-	-
Puget Sound non-treaty salmon gillnet (all areas and species)	93	obs data	1.3%	0	0	0
Puget Sound non-treaty chum salmon gillnet (areas 10/11 and 12/12B)	94	obs data	11%	0	0	0
Puget Sound treaty chum salmon gillnet (areas 12, 12B, and 12C)	94	obs data	2.2%	0	0	0
Puget Sound treaty chum and sockeye salmon gillnet (areas 4B, 5, and 6C)	94	obs data	7.5%	0	0	0

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Percent observer coverage	Observed mortality	Estimated mortality	Mean annual takes (CV in parentheses)
Puget Sound treaty and non-treaty sockeye salmon gillnet (areas 7 and 7A)	94	obs data	7%	0	0	0
Minimum total annual takes						0

<sup>1</sup>1993 and 1995-98 mortality estimates are included in the average.

Due to a lack of observer programs, there are few data concerning the mortality of marine mammals incidental to Canadian commercial fisheries. Since 1990, there have been no reported fishery-related strandings of killer whales in Canadian waters. However, in 1994 one killer whale was reported to have contacted a salmon gillnet but did not entangle (Guenther et al. 1995). Data regarding the level of killer whale mortality related to commercial fisheries in Canadian waters are not available, though the mortality level is thought to be minimal.

During this decade there have been no reported takes from this stock incidental to commercial fishing operations (D. Ellifrit, pers. comm.), no reports of interactions between killer whales and longline operations (as occurs in Alaskan waters; see Yano and Dahlheim 1995), no reports of stranded animals with net marks, and no photographs of individual whales carrying fishing gear. The total fishery mortality and serious injury for this stock is zero.

#### STATUS OF STOCK

Killer whales are not listed as “depleted” under the MMPA or listed as “threatened “ or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act. Based on currently available data, the total fishery mortality and serious injury for this stock (0) is not known to exceed 10% of the calculated PBR (0.08) and, therefore, can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. The estimated annual level of human-caused mortality and serious injury of zero animals per year is not known to exceed the PBR (0.8). Therefore, the Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock of killer whales is not classified as a strategic stock. The stock size has decreased in recent years, although at this time it is not possible to assess the status of this stock relative to its Optimum Sustainable Population (OSP) level.

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