

MELON-HEADED WHALE (*Peponocephala electra*): Hawaiian Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Melon-headed whales are found in tropical and warm-temperate waters throughout the world. The distribution of reported sightings suggests that the oceanic habitat of this species is primarily equatorial waters (Perryman et al. 1994). Small numbers have been taken in the eastern tropical Pacific, and they are occasionally killed in direct fisheries in Japan and elsewhere in the western Pacific. Large herds are seen regularly in Hawaiian waters, especially off the Waianae coast of Oahu, the north Kohala coast of Hawaii, and the leeward coast of Lanai (Shallenberger 1981). A comprehensive shipboard survey of the Hawaiian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), resulted in only one sighting of melon-headed whales (Figure 1; Barlow 2003). Inter-island movements from Kauai to Hawaii have been documented and genetic samples from at least 82 animals are available for future stock structure analyses (R.W. Baird, pers. comm.). Little is known about this

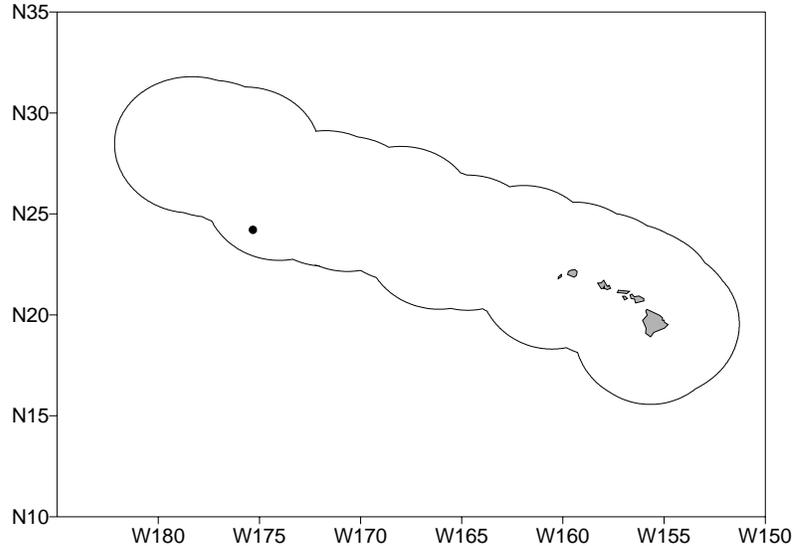


Figure 1. Melon-headed whale sighting location during the 2002 shipboard survey of U.S. EEZ waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands (Barlow 2003; see Appendix 2 for details on timing and location of survey effort). Outer line represents approximate boundary of survey area and U.S. EEZ.

species elsewhere in its range, and most knowledge about its biology comes from mass strandings (Perryman et al. 1994). Fourteen strandings are known from Hawaii (Nishiwaki and Norris 1966; Shallenberger 1981; Nitta 1991; Maldini 2005). For the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) stock assessment reports, there is a single Pacific management stock including only animals found within the U.S. EEZ of the Hawaiian Islands.

POPULATION SIZE

An abundance estimate of melon-headed whales is available for the eastern tropical Pacific (Wade and Gerrodette 1993), but it is not known whether any of these animals are part of the same population that occurs around the Hawaiian Islands. As part of the Marine Mammal Research Program of the Acoustic Thermometry of Ocean Climate (ATOC) study, a total of twelve aerial surveys were conducted within about 25 nmi of the main Hawaiian Islands in 1993, 1995 and 1998. An abundance estimate of 154 (CV=0.88) melon-headed whales was calculated from the combined survey data (Mobley et al. 2000). This study underestimated the total number of melon-headed whales within the U.S. EEZ off Hawaii, because areas around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) and beyond 25 nautical miles from the main islands were not surveyed. Furthermore, the data on which this estimate was based are now over 5 years old. A 2002 shipboard line-transect survey of the entire Hawaiian Islands EEZ resulted in an abundance estimate of 2,947 (CV=1.11) melon-headed whales (Barlow 2003). This is currently the best available abundance estimate for this stock.

Minimum Population Estimate

The log-normal 20th percentile of the 2002 abundance estimate is 1,386 melon-headed whales.

Current Population Trend

No data are available on current population trend.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

No data are available on current or maximum net productivity rate.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (1,386) times one half the default maximum net growth rate for cetaceans (½ of 4%) times a recovery factor of 0.50 (for a species of unknown status with no known fishery mortality; Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 14 melon-headed whales per year.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

Information on fishery-related mortality and serious injury of cetaceans in Hawaiian waters is limited, but the gear types used in Hawaiian fisheries are responsible for marine mammal mortality and serious injury in other fisheries throughout U.S. waters. Gillnets appear to capture marine mammals wherever they are used, and float lines from lobster traps and longlines can be expected to occasionally entangle whales (Perrin et al. 1994).

Interactions with cetaceans have been reported for all Hawaiian pelagic fisheries (Nitta and Henderson 1993), but no interactions with melon-headed whales have been documented. None were observed hooked in the Hawaii-based longline fishery between 1994 and 2002, with approximately 4-25% of all effort observed (Forney 2004). Interaction rates between dolphins and the NWHI bottomfish fishery have been estimated based on studies conducted in 1990-1993, indicating that an average of 2.67 dolphin interactions, most likely involving bottlenose and rough-toothed dolphins, occurred for every 1000 fish brought on board (Kobayashi and Kawamoto 1995). Fishermen claim interactions with dolphins who steal bait and catch are increasing. It is not known whether these interactions result in serious injury or mortality of dolphins, nor whether melon-headed whales are involved.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of melon-headed whales in Hawaiian waters relative to OSP is unknown, and there are insufficient data to evaluate trends in abundance. No habitat issues are known to be of concern for this species. They are not listed as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (1973), nor as “depleted” under the MMPA. The Hawaiian stock of melon-headed whales is not considered strategic under the 1994 amendments to the MMPA given the absence of reported fisheries related mortality or serious injury. Insufficient information is available to determine whether the total fishery mortality and serious injury for melon-headed whales is insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate.

REFERENCES

- Barlow, J. 2003. Cetacean abundance in Hawaiian waters during summer/fall 2002. Admin. Rep. LJ-03-13. Southwest Fisheries Science Center, National Marine Fisheries Service, 8604 La Jolla Shores Drive, La Jolla, CA 92037.
- Forney, K.A. 2004. Estimates of cetacean mortality and injury in two U.S. Pacific longline fisheries, 1994-2002. Admin. Rep. LJ-04-07. Southwest Fisheries Science Center, National Marine Fisheries Service, 8604 La Jolla Shores Drive, La Jolla, CA 92037. 17 pp.
- Kobayashi, D. R. and K. E. Kawamoto. 1995. Evaluation of shark, dolphin, and monk seal interactions with Northwestern Hawaiian Island bottomfishing activity: a comparison of two time periods and an estimate of economic impacts. Fisheries Research 23:11-22.
- Maldini, D., L. Mazzuca, and S. Atkinson. 2005. Odontocete stranding patterns in the Main Hawaiian Islands (1937-2002): How do they compare with live animal surveys? Pacific Science 59(1):55-67.
- Mobley, J. R. , Jr, S. S. Spitz, K. A. Forney, R. A. Grotefendt, and P. H. Forestall. 2000. Distribution and abundance of odontocete species in Hawaiian waters: preliminary results of 1993-98 aerial surveys Admin. Rep. LJ-00-14C. Southwest Fisheries Science Center, National Marine Fisheries Service, P.O. Box 271, La Jolla, CA 92038. 26 pp.
- Nishiwaki, M. and K. S. Norris. 1966. A new genus, *Peponocephala*, for the odontocete cetacean species *Electra electra*. Sci. Rep. Whales Res. Inst. 20:95-100.
- Nitta, E. 1991. The marine mammal stranding network for Hawaii: an overview. In: J.E. Reynolds III, D.K. Odell (eds.), Marine Mammal Strandings in the United States, pp.56-62. NOAA Tech. Rep. NMFS 98, 157 pp.
- Nitta, E. and J. R. Henderson. 1993. A review of interactions between Hawaii's fisheries and protected species. Mar. Fish. Rev. 55(2):83-92.

- Perrin, W.F., G. P. Donovan and J. Barlow. 1994. Gillnets and Cetaceans. Rep. Int. Whal. Commn., Special Issue 15, 629 pp.
- Perryman, W. L., D. W. K. Au, S. Leatherwood, and T. A. Jefferson. 1994. Melon-headed whale *Peponocephala electra* Gray, 1846. In: S. H. Ridgway and R. Harrison (eds.), Handbook of Marine Mammals, Vol.5: The First Book of Dolphins, pp. 363-386. Academic Press, 416 pp.
- Shallenberger, E.W. 1981. The status of Hawaiian cetaceans. Final report to U.S. Marine Mammal Commission. MMC-77/23, 79pp.
- Wade, P. R. and R. P. Angliss. 1997. Guidelines for Assessing Marine Mammal Stocks: Report of the GAMMS Workshop April 3-5, 1996, Seattle, Washington. U. S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-OPR-12. 93 pp.
- Wade, P. R. and T. Gerrodette. 1993. Estimates of cetacean abundance and distribution in the eastern tropical Pacific. Rep. Int. Whal. Commn. 43:477-493.