HARP SEAL (*Phoca groenlandica*): Western North Atlantic Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The harp seal occurs throughout much of the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans (Ronald and Healey 1981; Lavigne and Kovacs 1988); however, in recent years, numbers of sightings and strandings have been increasing off the east coast of the United States from Maine to New Jersey (Katona *et al.* 1993; Stevick and Fernald 1998; B. Rubinstein, pers. comm., New England Aquarium). These appearances usually occur in January-May, when the western North Atlantic stock of harp seals is at its most southern point of migration. The worlds' harp seal population is divided into three separate stocks, each identified with a specific breeding site (Bonner 1990; Lavigne and Kovacs 1988). The largest stock is located in the western North Atlantic off eastern Canada and is divided into two breeding herds which breed on the pack ice. The Front herd breeds off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Gulf herd breeds near the Magdalen Islands in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Sergeant 1965; Lavigne and Kovacs 1988). The second stock breeds in the White Sea off the coast of the Soviet Union, and the third stock breeds on the West Ice off of eastern Greenland (Lavigne and Kovacs 1988; Anon 1998). Harp seals are highly migratory (Sergeant 1965; Stenson and Sjare 1997). Breeding occurs at different times between mid-February and April for each stock. Adults then assemble north of their whelping patches to undergo the annual molt. The migration then continues north to Arctic summer feeding grounds. In late September, after a summer of feeding, nearly all adults and some of the immature animals migrate southward along the Labrador coast, usually reaching the entrance to the Gulf of St. Lawrence by early winter. There they split into two groups, one moving into the Gulf and the other remaining off the coast of Newfoundland. Following mating, the seals disperse to feed, and in late April they again concentrate in large numbers on the ice to molt.

The extreme southern limit of the harp seal's habitat extends into the USA Atlantic Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) during winter and spring. The increase in numbers and geographic distribution of harp seals in New England to mid-Atlantic waters is based primarily on strandings, and secondarily on fishery bycatch (McAlpine and Walker 1990; Rubinstein 1994).

POPULATION SIZE

The total population size of harp seals is unknown; however, three seasonal abundance estimates are available which used a variety of methods including aerial surveys and mark-recapture (Table 1). Generally, these methods include surveying the whelping concentrations and modeling pup production. Harp seal pup production in the 1950s was estimated at 645,000 (Sergeant 1975), decreasing to 225,000 by 1970 (Sergeant 1975). Estimates began to increase at that time and have continued to rise, reaching 478,000 in 1979 (Bowen and Sergeant 1983; Bowen and Sergeant 1985) and 577,900 in 1990 (Stenson *et al.* 1993).

Roff and Bowen (1983) developed an estimation model to provide a more precise estimate of total population. This technique incorporates recent pregnancy rates and estimates of age-specific hunting mortality (CAFSAC 1992).

Shelton *et al.* (1992) applied a harp seal estimation model to the 1990 pup production and obtained an estimate of 3.1 million (range 2.7-3.5 million; Stenson 1993). Using a revised population model, 1994 pup count data, and two assumptions regarding pup mortality rates; Shelton *et al.* (1996) estimated pup production and total population size for the period 1955-1994. The 1994 total population estimates were 4.5-4.8 million harp seals (Table1).

Table 1. Summary of abundance estimates (pups and total) for western North Atlantic harp seals. Year and area covered during each abundance survey, and resulting abundance estimate (N_{min}) and coefficient of variation (CV).

Month/Year	Area	N_{min}	CV
1994	Eastern Atlantic Canada-Labrador	702,900 pups	0.09
1994	Eastern Atlantic Canada-Labrador	4.5-4.8 million	none reported

Minimum population estimate

Present data are insufficient to calculate the minimum population estimate for USA waters. It is estimated there are at least 4.8 million harp seals in Canada (Shelton *et al.* 1996).

Current population trend

The population appears to be increasing in USA waters, judging from the increased number of stranded harp seals, but the magnitude of the suspected increase is unknown. In Canada, since 1990 the average annual growth rate has been estimated to be about 5% (Shelton *et al.* 1996).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. The best data are based on Canadian studies. Recent studies indicate that pup production has increased, but the rate of population increase cannot be quantified at this time (Stenson *et al.* 1996). The mean age of sexual maturity was 5.8 yrs in the mid-1950's, declining to 4.6 yrs in the early 1980's and then increasing to 5.4 yrs in the early 1990's (Sjare *et al.* 1996).

For purposes of this assessment, the maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.12. This value is based on theoretical modeling showing that pinniped populations may not grow at rates much greater than 12% given the constraints of their reproductive life history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal (PBR) is the product of 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 is unknown. The maximum productivity rate is 0.12, the default value for pinnipeds. The "recovery" factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP) was set at 1.0 because it was believed that harp seals are within OSP. PBR for the western North Atlantic harp seal in USA waters is unknown. Applying the formula to the minimum population estimate for Canadian waters results in a "PBR" of 288,000 harp seals.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Total annual estimated average fishery-related mortality or serious injury to this stock during 1994-1998 was 402 harp seals CV=0.26; Table 2).

Fishery Information

USA

Data on current incidental takes in USA fisheries are available from several sources. In 1986, NMFS established a mandatory self-reported fisheries information system for large pelagic fisheries. Data files are maintained at the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC). The Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) Sea Sampling Observer Program was initiated in 1989, and since that year several fisheries have been covered by the program. In late 1992 and in 1993, the SEFSC provided observer coverage of pelagic longline vessels fishing off the Grand Banks (Tail of the Banks) and provides observer coverage of vessels fishing south of Cape Hatteras.

Recent bycatch has been observed by NMFS Sea Samplers in the Northeast multispecies sink gillnet fisheries, but no mortalities have been documented in the mid-Atlantic coastal gillnet, Atlantic drift gillnet, pelagic pair trawl or pelagic longline fisheries.

Northeast Multispecies Sink Gillnet:

In 1993, there were approximately 349 full and part-time vessels in the Northeast multispecies sink gillnet fishery, which covered the Gulf of Maine and southern New England (Table 2). An additional 187 vessels were reported to occasionally fish in the Gulf of Maine with gillnets for bait or personal use; however, these vessels were not covered by the observer program (Walden 1996) and their fishing effort was not used in estimating mortality. In 1998, there were approximately 310 vessels in this fishery (NMFS unpublished data). Observer coverage in terms of trips has been 1%, 6%, 7%, 5%, 7%, 5%,4%, 6%, and 5% for 1990 to 1998, respectively. The fishery has been observed in the Gulf of Maine and in Southern New England. There were 114 harp seal mortalities observed in the Northeast multispecies sink gillnet fishery between 1990 and 1998. Annual estimates of harp seal bycatch in the Northeast multispecies sink gillnet fishery reflect seasonal distribution of the species and of fishing effort. Estimated annual mortalities (CV in parentheses) from

this fishery during 1990-1998 was zero (1990-1993), 861 in 1994 (0.58), 694 in 1995 (0.27), 89 in 1996 (0.55), 269 in 1997 (0.50), and 78 in 1998 (0.48). The 1994 and 1995 bycatches, respectively, include 16 and 153 animals from the estimated number of unknown seals (based on observed mortalities of seals that could not be identified to species). The unknown seals were prorated, based on spatial/temporal patterns of bycatch of harbor seals, gray seals, harp seals, and hooded seals. Average annual estimated fishery-related mortality and serious injury to this stock attributable to this fishery during 1994-1998 was 398 harp seals (CV=0.26). The stratification design used is the same as that for harbor porpoise (Bravington and Bisack 1996). The bycatch occurred principally in winter (January-May) and was mainly in waters between Cape Ann and New Hampshire. One observed winter mortality was in waters south of Cape Cod.

Mid-Atlantic Coastal Gillnet:

Observer coverage of the USA Atlantic coastal gillnet fishery was initiated by the NEFSC Sea Sampling program in July, 1993; and from July to December 1993, 20 trips were observed. During 1994 and 1995 221 and 382 trips were observed, respectively. This fishery, which extends from North Carolina to New York, is actually a combination of small vessel fisheries that target a variety of fish species, some of which operate right off the beach. The number of vessels in this fishery is unknown, because records which are held by both state and federal agencies have not been centralized and standardized. Observer coverage, expressed as percent of tons of fish landed, was 5% 4%, and 3%, and 5% for 1995, 1996, and 1997, and 1998 (Table 2).

No harp seals were taken in observed trips during 1993-1997. One harp seal was observed taken in 1998 (Table 2). Observed effort was concentrated off NJ and scattered between DE and NC from 1 to 50 miles off the beach. All bycatches were documented during January to April. Using the observed takes, the estimated annual mortality (CV in parentheses) attributed to this fishery was 0 in 1995-1997 (0), and 17 in 1998 (1.02). Average annual estimated fishery-related mortality attributable to this fishery during 1995-1998 was 4.3 harp seals (CV=1.02)

CANADA

An unknown number of harp seals have been taken in Newfoundland and Labrador groundfish gillnets (Read 1994). Harp seals are being taken in Canadian lumpfish and groundfish gillnets, and trawls, but estimates of total removals have not been calculated to date (Anon. 1994).

There were 3,121 cod traps operating in Newfoundland and Labrador during 1979, and about 7,500 in 1980 (Read 1994). This fishery was closed at the end of 1993 due to collapse of Canadian groundfish resources.

In 1996, observers recorded four harp seals (one released alive) in Spanish deep water trawl fishing on the southern edge of the Grand Bank (NAFO Areas 3) (Lens 1997). Seal bycatches occurred year-round, but interactions were highest during April-June. Many of the seals that died during fishing activities were unidentified. The proportion of sets with mortality (all seals) was 2.7 per 1,000 hauls (0.003).

Table 2. Summary of the incidental mortality of harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*) by commercial fishery including the years sampled (Years), the number of vessels active within the fishery (Vessels), the type of data used (Data Type), the annual observer coverage (Observer Coverage), the mortalities recorded by on-board observers (Observed Mortality), the estimated annual mortality (Estimated Mortality), the estimated CV of the annual mortality (Estimated CVs) and the mean annual mortality (CV in parentheses).

Fishery	Years	Vessels	Data Type [1]	Observer Coverage [2]	Observed Mortality [3]	Estimated Mortality	Estimated CVs	Mean Annual Mortality
Northeast Multispecies Sink Gillnet	94-98	301	Obs. Data Weighout, Logbooks	.07, .05, .04, .06, .05	33, 27, 9, 40, 4	861, 694, 89, 269, 78	.58, .27, .55, .50, .48	398 (0.26)
Mid Atlantic Coastal Sink Gillnet	95-98	Unk[4]	Obs. Data Weighout	.05, .04, .03, .05	0, 0, 0, 1	0, 0, 0, 17	0, 0, 0, 1.02	4 (1.02)
TOTAL								402 (0.26)

[1] Observer data (Obs. Data) are used to measure bycatch rates, and the data are collected within the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) Sea Sampling Program. NEFSC collects Weighout (Weighout) landings data, and total landings are used as a measure of total effort for the sink gillnet fishery. Mandatory logbook (Logbook) data are used to determine the spatial distribution of some fishing effort in the Northeast multispecies sink gillnet fishery.

[2] The observer coverage for the Northeast multispecies sink gillnet fishery is measured in trips. Observer coverage for the Mid Atlantic coastal sink gillnet fishery is measured in tons of fish landed.

[3] In the New England sink gillnet fishery thirty-one and zero harp seals were taken on pingered trips during 1997 and 1998, respectively. During 1997 and 1998 thirty-one and four harp seals were observed on "mammal trips", respectively. See Bisack (1997) for “trip” type definitions.

[4] Number of vessels is not known.

Other Mortality

Harp seals have been commercially hunted since the mid-1800's in the Canadian Atlantic (Stenson 1993). A total allowable catch (TAC) of 200,000 harp seals was set for the large vessel hunt in 1971. The TAC varied until 1982 when it was set at 186,000 seals, and remained at this level through 1995 (Stenson 1993; Anon 1998). The TAC was increased to 250,000 and 275,000, respectively in 1996 and 1997 (Anon 1998). Catches ranged from 124,000 to 231,000 from 1971-1982, declining to a range of 19,000 to 94,000 between 1983-1995, and increased dramatically to 242,000 (1996) and 261,000 (1997) (Stenson 1993; Anon 1998). The commercial catches do not account for subsistence takes, and animals that are killed but not landed (struck and lost) (Lavine 1999).

From 1988-1993 strandings each year were under 50, approaching 100 animals in 1994, and exceeding 100 animals in 1995-1996 (Rubinstein 1994; B. Rubinstein, New England Aquarium, pers. comm.). In addition, in 1996 there was a stranding in North Carolina. From 1997-1998 224 strandings were recorded, including one in North Carolina. Most of the strandings occurred in Maine (27), Massachusetts (51), New Jersey (21), and New York (92). Few animals showed signs of human interactions, and except for one shot animal the interactions were classified as other. The increased number of strandings may indicate a possible shift in distribution or expansion southward into USA waters.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of the harp seal stock, relative to OSP, in the USA Atlantic EEZ is unknown, but the population appears to be increasing in Canadian waters. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is believed to be very low relative to the population size in Canadian waters and can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. The level of human-caused mortality and serious injury in the USA Atlantic EEZ is unknown, but believed to be very low relative to the total stock size; therefore, this is not a strategic stock.

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