Revised 12/15/2009

MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*): Alaska Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

In the North Pacific, minke whales occur from the Bering and Chukchi Seas south to near the Equator (Leatherwood et al. 1982). The following information was considered in classifying stock structure according to the Dizon et al. (1992) phylogeographic approach: 1) Distributional data: geographic distribution continuous, 2) Population response data: unknown; 3) Phenotypic data: unknown; and 4) Genotypic data: unknown. Based on this limited information, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) recognizes three stocks of minke whales in the North Pacific: one in the Sea of Japan/East China Sea, one in the rest of the western Pacific west of 180°N, and one in the "remainder" of the Pacific (Donovan 1991). The "remainder" stock designation reflects the lack of exploitation in the eastern Pacific and does not indicate that only one population exists in this area (Donovan 1991). In the "remainder" area, minke whales are relatively common in the Bering and Chukchi Seas and in the inshore waters of the Gulf of Alaska (Mizroch 1992), but are not considered abundant in any other part of the eastern Pacific (Leatherwood et al. 1982, Brueggeman et al. 1990). Minke whales are known to penetrate loose ice during the summer, and some individuals venture north of the Bering Strait (Leatherwood et al. 1982).

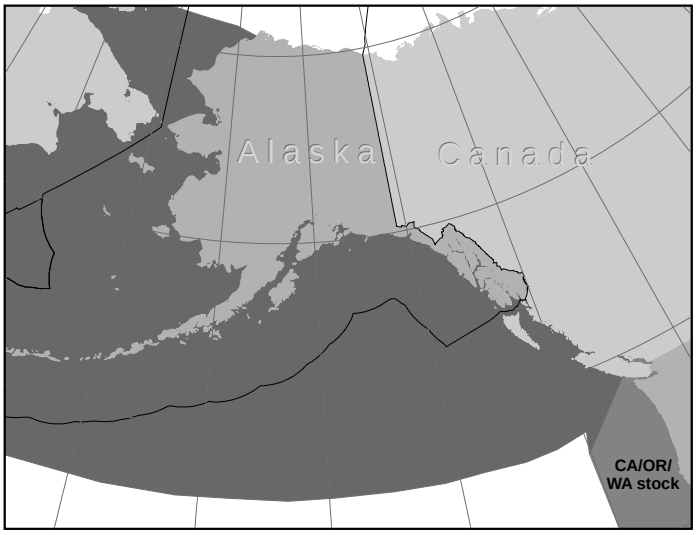

Figure 41. Approximate distribution of minke whales in the eastern North Pacific (shaded area).

Ship surveys in the central-eastern and southeastern Bering Sea in 1999 and 2000 resulted in new information about the distribution and relative abundance of minke whales in these areas (Moore et al. 2000; Moore et al. 2002; see Fig. 40 for location of survey areas). Minke whale abundance estimates were similar in the central-eastern Bering Sea and the southeastern Bering Sea (Moore et al. 2002). Minke whales occurred throughout the area surveyed, but most sightings of minke whales in the central-eastern Bering Sea occurred along the upper slope in waters 100-200 m deep (Moore et al. 2000); sightings in the southeastern Bering Sea occurred along the north side of the Alaska Peninsula and were associated with the 100 m contour near the Pribilof Islands (Moore et al. 2002).

In the northern part of their range minke whales are believed to be migratory, whereas they appear to establish home ranges in the inland waters of Washington and along central California (Dorsey et al. 1990). Because the "resident" minke whales from California to Washington appear behaviorally distinct from migratory whales farther north, minke whales in Alaska are considered a separate stock from minke whales in California, Oregon, and Washington. Accordingly, two stocks of minke whales are recognized in U. S. waters: 1) Alaska, and 2) California/Washington/Oregon (Fig. 41). The California/ Oregon/Washington minke whale stock is reported separately in the Stock Assessment Reports for the Pacific Region.

POPULATION SIZE

No estimates have been made for the number of minke whales in the entire North Pacific. However, some information is now available on the numbers of minke whales in some areas of Alaska. A visual survey for cetaceans was conducted in the central-eastern Bering Sea in July-August 1999, and in the southeastern Bering Sea in 2000, in cooperation with research on commercial fisheries (Moore et al. 2000; Moore et al. 2002; see Fig. 40 for locations of survey areas). The survey included 1,761 km and 2,194 km of effort in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Results of the surveys in 1999 and 2000 provide provisional abundance estimates of 810 (CV = 0.36) and 1,003 (CV = 0.26) minke whales in the central-eastern and southeastern Bering Sea, respectively (Moore et al. 2002). These estimates are considered provisional because they have not been corrected for animals missed on the trackline,

animals submerged when the ship passed, or responsive movement. Additionally, line-transect surveys were conducted in shelf and nearshore waters (within 30-45nm of land) in 2001-2003 from the Kenai Fjords in the Gulf of Alaska to the central Aleutian Islands. Minke whale abundance was estimated to be 1,233 (CV=0.34) for this area (Zerbini et al. 2006). This estimate has also not been corrected for animals missed on the trackline. The majority of the sightings were in the Aleutian Islands rather than in the Gulf of Alaska, and in water shallower than 200 m. These estimates cannot be used as an estimate of the entire Alaska stock of minke whales because only a portion of the stock's range was surveyed.

Minimum Population

At this time, it is not possible to produce a reliable estimate of minimum abundance for this stock, as current estimates of abundance are not available.

Current Population Trend

There are no data on trends in minke whale abundance in Alaska waters.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

There are no estimates of the growth rate of minke whale populations in the North Pacific (Best 1993). Hence, until additional data become available, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be employed for this stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 reauthorized Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the potential biological removal (PBR) is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{Max} \times F_R$. Given the status of this stock is unknown, the appropriate recovery factor is 0.5 (Wade and Angliss 1997). However, because an estimate of minimum abundance is not available, the PBR for the Alaska minke whale stock is unknown at this time.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY

Fishery Information

Six different commercial fisheries operating in Alaska waters within the range of the Alaska minke whale stock were monitored for incidental take by NMFS observers during 2002-2006: Bering Sea (and Aleutian Islands) groundfish trawl, longline, and pot fisheries, and Gulf of Alaska groundfish trawl, longline, and pot fisheries. In 1989, one minke whale mortality (extrapolated to 2 mortalities) was observed in the Bering Sea/Gulf of Alaska joint-venture groundfish trawl fishery, the predecessor to the current Alaska groundfish trawl fishery. The Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands groundfish trawl fishery incurred one mortality of a minke whale in 2000, which extrapolated to an estimated two minke whale mortalities for that year. The total estimated mortality and serious injury incurred by this stock as a result of interactions with U. S. commercial fisheries for 2002-2006 is 0.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

No minke whales were ever taken by the modern shore-based whale fishery in the eastern North Pacific which lasted from 1905 to 1971 (Rice 1974). Subsistence takes of minke whales by Alaska Natives are rare, but have been known to occur. Only seven minke whales are reported the have been taken for subsistence by Alaska Natives between 1930 and 1987 (C. Allison, International Whaling Commission, United Kingdom, pers. comm.). The most recent harvest (2 whales) in Alaska occurred in 1989 (Anonymous 1991). Based on this information, the annual subsistence take averaged zero minke whales during the 3-year period from 1993 to 1995.

STATUS OF STOCK

Minke whales are not listed as "depleted" under the MMPA or listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. The greatest uncertainty regarding the status of the Alaska minke whale stock has to do with the uncertainty pertaining to the stock structure of this species in the eastern North Pacific. Because minke whales are considered common in the waters off Alaska and because the number of human-related removals is currently thought to be minimal, this stock is not considered a strategic stock. Reliable estimates of the minimum population size, population trends, PBR, and status of the stock relative to OSP are currently not available. Because

the PBR is unknown, the level of annual U.S. commercial fishery-related mortality that can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate is unknown.

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