SPERM WHALE (*Physeter macrocephalus*): Western North Atlantic Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The distribution of the sperm whale in the U.S. EEZ occurs on the continental shelf edge, over the continental slope, and into mid-ocean regions (Figure 1). Waring *et al*. (1993) suggest that this offshore distribution is more commonly associated with the Gulf Stream edge and other features. However, the sperm whales that occur in the eastern U.S. EEZ likely represent only a fraction of the total stock. The nature of linkages of the U.S. habitat with those to the south, north, and offshore is unknown. Historical whaling records compiled by Schmidly (1981) suggested an offshore distribution off the southeast U.S., over the Blake Plateau, and into deep ocean. In the southeast Caribbean, both large and small adults, as well as calves and juveniles of different sizes are reported (Watkins *et al*. 1985). Whether the northwest Atlantic population is discrete from the northwestern or northeastern Atlantic is currently unresolved. There exists one tag return of a male tagged off Browns Bank (Nova Scotia) in 1966 and returned from Spain in 1973.

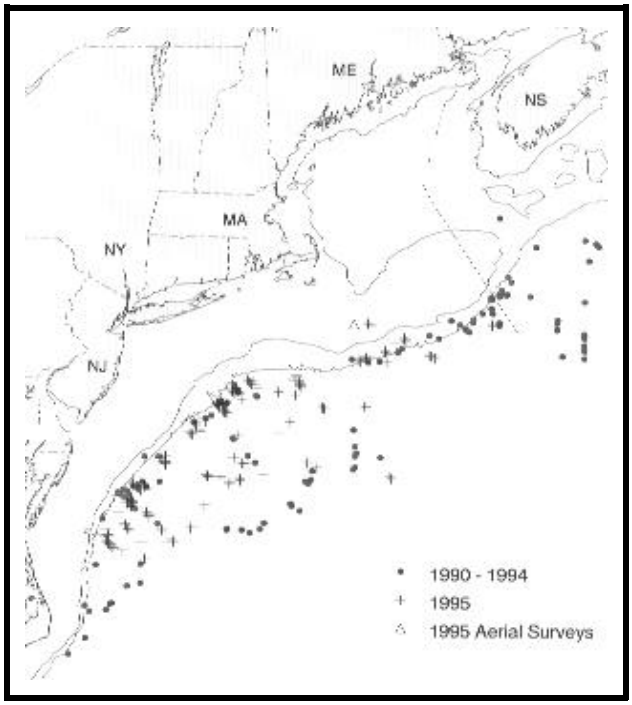

Figure 1. *Distribution of sperm whale sightings from NEFSC shipboard and aerial surveys during the summer in 1990-1995. Isobaths are at 100 m and 1,000 m.*

In the U.S. EEZ waters, there appears to be a distinct seasonal cycle(CeTAP 1982; Scott and Sadove 1997). In winter, sperm whales are concentrated east and northeast of Cape Hatteras. In spring, the center of distribution shifts northward to east of Delaware and Virginia, and is widespread throughout the central portion of the mid-Atlantic bight and the southern portion of Georges Bank. In summer, the distribution is similar but now also includes the area east and north of Georges Bank and into the Northeast Channel region, as well as the continental shelf (inshore of the 100m isobath) south of New England. In the fall, sperm whale occurrence south of New England on the continental shelf is at its highest level, and there remains a continental shelf edge occurrence in the mid-Atlantic bight.

Similar inshore (< 200m) observations have been made on the eastern Scotian Shelf, particularly in the region of "the Gully" (Whitehead *et al*. 1991).

Geographic distribution of sperm whales may be linked to their social structure and their low reproductive rate and both of these factors have management implications. Several basic groupings or social units are generally recognized — nursery schools, harem or mixed schools, juvenile or immature schools, bachelor schools, bull schools or pairs, and solitary bulls (Best 1979; Whitehead *et al*. 1991). These groupings have a distinct geographical distribution, with females and juveniles generally based in tropical and subtropical waters, and males more wide-ranging and occurring in higher latitudes. The basic social unit of the sperm whale appears to be the mixed school of adult females plus their calves and some juveniles of both sexes, normally numbering 20-40 animals in all. There is evidence that some social bonds persist for many years.

POPULATION SIZE

Total number of sperm whales off the U.S. or Canadian Atlantic coast are unknown, although seven estimates from selected regions of the habitat do exist for select time periods (Table 1): spring and summer of 1978-82, August 1990, June-July 1991, August-September 1991, June-July 1993, August 1994, and July-September 1995. These surveys were

conducted in continental shelf edge and deeper oceanic waters. Sightings were almost exclusively in the continental shelf edge and continental slope areas (Figure 1).

A population size of 219 sperm whales (CV=0.36) was estimated from an aerial survey program conducted from 1978 to 1982 on the continental shelf and shelf edge waters between Cape Hatteras, North Carolina and Nova Scotia (Table 1; CeTAP 1982). The estimate is based on an inverse variance weighted pooling of spring and summer data. An average of these seasons were chosen because the greatest proportion of the population off the northeast U.S. coast appeared in the study area during these seasons. This estimate does not include corrections for dive-time or g(0), the probability of detecting an animal group on the track line. This estimate may not reflect the current true population size because of its high degree of uncertainty, its old age, and it was estimated just after cessation of extensive foreign fishing operations in the region.

A population size of 338 (CV=0.31) sperm whales was estimated from an August 1990 shipboard line transect sighting survey, conducted principally along the Gulf Stream north wall between Cape Hatteras and Georges Bank (Table 1; Anon. 1990; Waring *et al.* 1992). Data were collected by one team that searched by naked eye and analyzed using DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993; Laake *et al.* 1993). Estimates include school size-bias, if applicable, but do not include corrections for g(0) or dive-time. Variability was estimated using bootstrap resampling techniques.

A population size of 736 (CV=0.36) sperm whales was estimated from a June and July 1991 shipboard line transect sighting survey conducted primarily between the 200 and 2,000m isobaths from Cape Hatteras to Georges Bank (Table 1; Waring *et al.* 1992). Data were collected by one team that searched by naked eye and analyzed using DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993; Laake *et al.* 1993). Estimates include school size-bias, if applicable, but no corrections for g(0) or dive-time. Variability was estimated using bootstrap resampling techniques.

A population size of 705 (CV=0.66) and 337 (CV=0.50) sperm whales was estimated from line transect aerial surveys conducted from August to September 1991 using the Twin Otter and AT-11, respectively (Table 1; Anon. 1991). The study area included that covered in the CeTAP study plus several additional continental slope survey blocks. Due to weather and logistical constraints, several survey blocks south and east of Georges Bank were not surveyed. The data were analyzed using DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993; Laake *et al.* 1993), where the CV was estimated using the bootstrap option. The abundance estimates do not include g(0) and were not pooled over platforms because the inter-platform calibration analysis has not been conducted.

A population size of 116 (CV=0.40) sperm whales was estimated from a June and July 1993 shipboard line transect sighting survey conducted principally between the 200 and 2,000m isobaths from the southern edge of Georges Bank, across the Northeast Channel to the southeastern edge of the Scotian Shelf (Table 1; Anon. 1993). Data were collected by two alternating teams that searched with 25x150 binoculars and were analyzed using DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993; Laake *et al.* 1993). Estimates include school size-bias, if applicable, but do not include corrections for g(0) or dive-time. Variability was estimated using bootstrap resampling techniques.

A population size of 623 (CV=0.52) sperm whales was estimated from an August 1994 shipboard line transect survey conducted within a Gulf Stream warm-core ring located in continental slope waters southeast of Georges Bank (Table 1; Anon. 1994). Data were collected by two alternating teams that searched with 25x150 binoculars and an independent observer who searched by naked eye from a separate platform on the bow. Data were analyzed using DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993; Laake *et al.* 1993). Estimates include school size-bias, if applicable, but do not include corrections for g(0) or dive-time. Variability was estimated using bootstrap resampling techniques.

A population size of 2,698 (CV=0.67) sperm whales was estimated from a July to September 1995 sighting survey conducted by two ships and an airplane that covered waters from Virginia to the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Table 1; Palka and Waring, in prep.). Total track line length was 32,600 km (17,600 nmi). The ships covered waters between the 50 and 1000 fathom contour lines, the northern edge of the Gulf Stream, and the northern Gulf of Maine/Bay of Fundy region. The airplane covered waters in the Mid-Atlantic from the coastline to the 50 fathom contour line, the southern Gulf of Maine, and shelf waters off Nova Scotia from the coastline to the 1000 fathom contour line. Shipboard data were collected using a two independent sighting team procedure and were analyzed using the product integral method (Palka 1995) and DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993). Shipboard estimates were corrected for g(0) and, if applicable, also for school size-bias. Standard aerial sighting procedures with two bubble windows and one belly window observer were used during the aerial survey. An estimate of g(0) was not made for the aerial portion of the survey. Estimates do not include corrections for dive-time. Variability was estimated using bootstrap resampling techniques.

Because all the sperm whale estimates presented here were not corrected for dive-time, they are likely downwardly biased and an underestimate of actual abundance. Given that the average dive-time of sperm whales is approximately 45 min (Whitehead *et al*. 1991; Watkins *et al*. 1993), the bias may be substantial.

Although the stratification schemes used in the 1990-1995 surveys did not always sample the same areas or encompass the entire sperm whale habitat, they did focus on segments of known or suspected high-use habitats off the northeastern U.S. coast. The collective 1990-95 data suggest that, seasonally, at least several hundred sperm whales are occupying these waters. The 1995 estimate is nearly eight-fold greater than CeTAP data from a decade previous. Sperm whale abundance may increase offshore, particularly in association with Gulf Stream and warm-core ring features; however, at present there is no reliable estimate of total sperm whale abundance in the western North Atlantic.

The best available current abundance estimate for the western North Atlantic sperm whale is 2,698 (CV=0.67) as estimated from the July to September 1995 line transect survey (Palka and Waring, in prep.) because this survey is recent and provided the most complete coverage of continental shelf edge and continental slope waters off the northeast U.S. coast.

Table 1. Summary of abundance estimates for the western North Atlantic sperm whale. Month, year, and area covered during each abundance survey, and resulting abundance estimate (N_{best}) and coefficient of variation (CV).

Month/Year	Area	N_{best}	CV
spring & summer 1978-82	Cape Hatteras, NC to Nova Scotia	219	0.36
Aug 1990	Gulf Stream	338	0.31
Jun-Jul 1991	Cape Hatteras, NC to Georges Bank, shelf edge only	736	0.36
Aug-Sep 1991	Cape Hatteras, NC to Nova Scotia	705 and 337*	0.66 and 0.50*
Jun-Jul 1993	Georges Bank to Scotian shelf, shelf edge only	116	0.40
Aug 1994	warm-core ring SE of Georges Bank	623	0.52
Jul-Sep 1995	Virginia to Gulf of St. Lawrence	2,698	0.67

* from data collected on the Twin Otter and AT-11, respectively.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normally distributed best abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distribution as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for sperm whales is 2,698 (CV=0.67). The minimum population estimate for the western North Atlantic sperm whale is 1,617 (CV=0.67).

Current Population Trend

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

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. While more is probably known about sperm whale life history in other areas, some life history and vital rates information is available for the northwest Atlantic. These include: calving interval is 3-4 years, lactation period is 24 months, gestation period is 14.5-16.5 months, births occur mainly in July to November, length at birth is 405 cm, length at sexual maturity 11.0-12.0 m for males, and 8.3-9.2 m for females, mean age at sexual maturity is 19 years for males and 9 years for females, and mean age at physical maturity is 45 years for males and 30 years for females (Best 1974; Lockyer 1981).

For purposes of this assessment, 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 minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate, and a "recovery" factor (Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is 1,617 (CV=0.67). 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 0.10 because the sperm whale is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). PBR for the western North Atlantic sperm whale is 3.2.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY

Four hundred twenty-four sperm whales were harvested in the Newfoundland-Labrador area between 1904-1972 and 109 sperm whales were taken near Nova Scotia in 1964-1972 (Mitchell and Kozicki 1984) in a Canadian whaling fishery. There was also a well-documented sperm whale fishery based on the west coast of Iceland. Other sperm whale catches occurred near West Greenland, the Azores, Madeira, Spain, Spanish Morocco, Norway (coastal and pelagic), Faroes, and British coastal. At present, because of their general offshore distribution, sperm whales are less likely to be impacted by humans and those impacts that do occur are less likely to be recorded. There has been no complete analysis and reporting of existing data on this topic for the western North Atlantic.

Only two records exist in the present NEFSC by-catch database. In July 1990, a sperm whale was entangled and subsequently released (injured) from a pelagic drift gillnet near the continental shelf edge on southern Georges Bank. During June 1995, one sperm whale was entangled with "gear in/around several body parts" then released injured from a pelagic drift gillnet haul located on the shelf edge between Oceanographer and Hydrographer Canyons on Georges Bank.

There were no observed sperm whale mortalities in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) during 1991-1995. There is no information on incidental mortality in fisheries in Canadian waters.

Fishery Information

Data on current incidental takes in U.S. 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.

By-catch has been observed by NMFS Sea Samplers in the pelagic drift gillnet fishery, but no mortalities or serious injuries have been documented in the pelagic longline, pelagic pair trawl, New England multispecies sink gillnet, mid-Atlantic coastal sink gillnet, or North Atlantic bottom trawl observed fisheries.

The estimated total number of hauls in the pelagic drift net fishery increased from 714 in 1989 to 1144 in 1990; thereafter, with the introduction of quotas, effort was severely reduced. The estimated number of hauls in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995 were 233, 243, 232, 197 and 164 respectively. Fifty-nine vessels participated in this fishery between 1989 and 1993. In 1995 there were 11 vessels in the fishery. Observer coverage, percent of sets observed, was 8% in 1989, 6% in 1990, 20% in 1991, 40% in 1992, 42% in 1993, 87% in 1994 and 99% in 1995. The greatest concentrations of effort were located along the southern edge of Georges Bank and off Cape Hatteras. Examination of the species composition of the catch and locations of the fishery throughout the year, suggested that the pelagic drift gillnet fishery be stratified into two strata, a southern or winter stratum, and a northern or summer stratum. Estimates of total by-catch,

for each year from 1989 to 1993, were obtained using the aggregated (pooled 1989-1993) catch rates, by strata, assuming the 1990 injury was a mortality (Northridge 1996). Estimated annual fishery-related mortality and serious injury (CV in parentheses) was 2.2 sperm whales in 1989 (2.43), 4.4 in 1990 (1.77), 0 in 1991, 0 in 1992, 0 in 1993, 0 in 1994 and 0 in 1995. Estimated average annual mortality and serious injury related to this fishery during 1991-1995 was zero, assuming the 1995 injured sperm whale was not a serious injury. The 1991-1995 time period provides a better characterization of the current fishery. Table 2 summarizes the number of animals released alive and classified as injured or non-injured. It also includes the ratio of observed to estimated mortalities for this fishery.

Table 2. Summary of sperm whales *(Physeter macrocephalus)* released alive, by commercial fishery, years sampled (Years), ratio of observed mortalities recorded by on-board observers to the estimated mortality (Ratio), the number of observed animals released alive and injured (Injured), and the number of observed animals released alive and uninjured (Uninjured)

Fishery	Years	Ratio	Injured	Uninjured
Pelagic Drift Gillnet	91-95	0, 0, 0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0, 0, 1[1]	0, 0, 0, 0, 0

[1] The observer recorded this animal being released alive and having the "gear in/around several body parts".

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of this stock relative to OSP in U.S. Atlantic EEZ is unknown, but the species is listed as endangered under the ESA. There are insufficient data to determine population trends. The current stock abundance estimate was based upon a small portion of the known stock range. Total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is less than 10% of the calculated PBR. This is a strategic stock because the species is listed as endangered under the ESA.

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