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HARBOR PORPOISE (*Phocoena phocoena*): Northern California Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

In the Pacific, harbor porpoise are found in coastal and inland waters from Point Conception, California to Alaska and across to Kamchatka and Japan (Gaskin 1984). Harbor porpoise appear to have more restricted movements along the western coast of the continental U.S. than along the eastern coast. Regional differences in pollutant residues in harbor porpoise indicate that they do not move extensively between California, Oregon, and Washington (Calambokidis and Barlow 1991). That study also showed some regional differences within California (although the sample size was small). This pattern stands as a sharp contrast to the eastern coast of the U.S. and Canada where harbor porpoise are believed to migrate seasonally from as far south as the Carolinas to the Gulf of Maine and Bay of Fundy (Polacheck et al. 1995). A phylogeographic analysis of genetic data from northeast Pacific harbor porpoise did not show complete concordance between DNA sequence types and geographic location (Rosel 1992). However, an analysis of molecular variance (AMOVA) of the same data with additional samples found significant genetic differences for four of the six pair-wise comparisons between the four areas investigated: California, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska (Rosel et al 1995). These results demonstrate that harbor porpoise along the west coast of North America are not panmictic or migratory, and movement is sufficiently restricted that genetic differences have evolved.

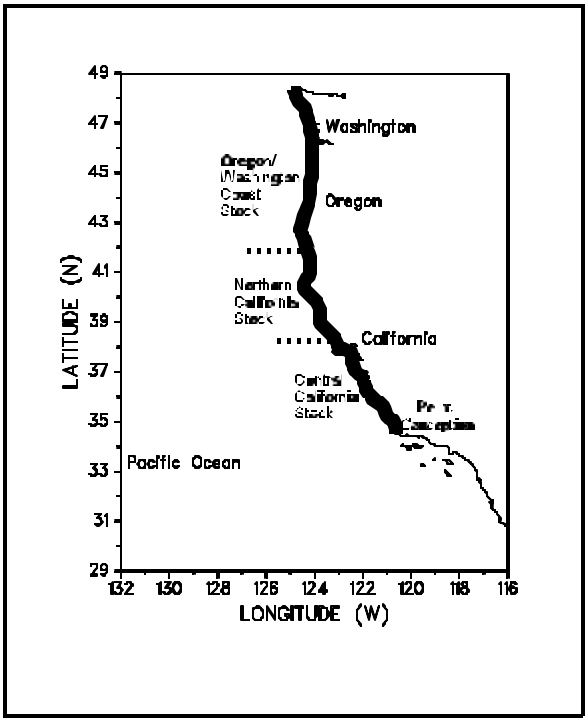

Figure 1. Stock boundaries and distributional range of harbor porpoise along the U.S. west coast.

In their assessment of harbor porpoise, Barlow and Hanan (1995) recommended that the animals inhabiting central California (defined to be from Point Conception to the Russian River) be treated as a separate stock. Their justifications for this were: 1) fishery mortality of harbor porpoise is limited to central California, 2) movement of individual animals appears to be restricted within California, and consequently 3) fishery mortality could cause the local depletion of harbor porpoise if central California is not managed separately. Although geographic structure exists along an almost continuous distribution of harbor porpoise from California to Alaska, stock boundaries are difficult to draw because any rigid line is (to a greater or lesser extent) arbitrary from a biological perspective. Nonetheless, failure to recognize geographic structure by defining management stocks can lead to depletion of local populations. Following the guidance of Barlow and Hanan (1995), we will consider the harbor porpoise in northern California as a separate stock. Other Pacific coast Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) stock assessment reports for harbor porpoise include: 1) a central California stock, 2) an Oregon/Washington coast stock, 3) an Inland Washington stock, 4) a Southeast Alaska stock, 5) a Gulf of Alaska stock, and 6) a Bering Sea stock. Stock assessment reports for central California and the Oregon and Washington stocks appear in this volume. The three Alaska harbor porpoise stocks are reported separately in the Stock Assessment Reports for the Alaska Region.

POPULATION SIZE

Forney (1999a) estimates the abundance of northern California harbor porpoise to be 11,066 (CV=0.39) based on aerial surveys in 1993-97. This estimate is not significantly different from the estimate of 9,250 (CV=0.23) presented by Barlow and Forney (1994) based on a series of aerial surveys from 1989 to 1993. The more recent estimate is higher and less precise, because it was calculated using a more recently developed correction factor for submerged animals (3.42 = 1/g(0) with g(0)=0.292, CV=0.366; Laake et al. 1997); this correction factor is slightly higher than and has a larger estimated variance than the one used by Barlow and Forney (1994; g(0)=0.324, CV=0.173). Both estimates only include the region between the coast and the 50-fathom (91m) isobath. Barlow (1988) found that the vast majority of harbor porpoise in California were within this depth range; however, Green et al. (1992) found that 24% of harbor porpoise seen

during aerial surveys of Oregon and Washington were between the 100m and 200m isobaths (55 to 109 fathoms). The above abundance estimates are likely to underestimate the total abundance of harbor porpoise by an unknown, but non-trivial amount.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate for harbor porpoise in northern California is taken as the lower 20th percentile of the log-normal distribution of the abundance estimated from the 1993-97 aerial surveys (Forney 1999a) or 8,061.

Current Population Trend

Forney (1999b) examines trends in relative harbor porpoise abundance in central and northern California based on aerial surveys from 1989-95. No significant trends were evident over this time period for the Northern California Stock.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Based on what are argued to be biological limits of the species (i.e. females give birth first at age 4 and produce one calf per year until death), the theoretical, maximum-conceivable growth rate of a closed harbor porpoise population was estimated as 9.4% per year (Barlow and Boveng 1991). This maximum theoretical rate may not be achievable for any real population. [Woodley and Read (1991) calculate a maximum growth rate of approximately 5% per year, but their argument for this being a maximum (i.e. that porpoise survival rates cannot exceed those of Himalayan thar) is not well justified.] Population growth rates have not actually been measured for any harbor porpoise population. We therefore conclude that the current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for the northern California stock of harbor porpoise.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (8,061) times one half the default maximum net growth rate for cetaceans (½ of 4%) times a recovery factor of 0.5 (for a species of unknown status), resulting in a PBR of 81.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY

Fishery Information

The incidental capture of harbor porpoise in California is largely limited to set gillnet fisheries in central California. Coastal setnets are not allowed in northern California (to protect salmon resources there).

Fishery Mortality Rates

Because there is no known fishery mortality in northern California, the fishery mortality can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate.

STATUS OF STOCK

Harbor porpoise in California are not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act nor as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Because of the lack of recent or historical sources of human-caused mortality, the harbor porpoise stock in northern California has been concluded to be within their Optimum Sustainable Population (OSP) level (Barlow and Forney 1994). Because there is no known human-caused mortality or serious injury, this would not be considered a "strategic" stock under the MMPA. There are no known habitat issues that are of particular concern for this stock.

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