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BRYDE'S WHALE (*Balaenoptera edeni*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Bryde's whales are distributed worldwide in tropical and sub-tropical waters, but the taxonomy and number of species and/or subspecies of Bryde's whales in the world is currently a topic of debate (Kato and Perrin 2009). In the western Atlantic Ocean, Bryde's whales are reported from the southeastern United States including the Gulf of Mexico and the southern West Indies to Cabo Frio, Brazil (Leatherwood and Reeves 1983). Most of the sighting records of Bryde's whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico (i.e., U.S. Gulf of Mexico) occurred in the northeastern Gulf and are from NMFS abundance surveys that were conducted during the spring (Figure 1; Hansen *et al.* 1995, 1996; Mullin and Hoggard 2000; Mullin and Fulling 2004; Maze-Foley and Mullin 2006). However, there are stranding records from throughout the year (Jefferson and Schiro 1997; Würsig *et al.* 2000). Genetic analysis suggests that Bryde's whales from the northern Gulf of Mexico represent a unique evolutionary lineage distinct from other recognized Bryde's whale subspecies, including those found in the southern Caribbean and southwestern Atlantic off Brazil (Rosel and Wilcox 2014). The geographic distribution of this Bryde's whale form has not yet been fully identified. Two strandings from the southeastern U.S. Atlantic coast share the same genetic characteristics with those from the northern Gulf of Mexico but it is unclear whether these are extralimital strays or they indicate the population extends from the northeastern Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic coast of the southern U.S. (Rosel and Wilcox 2014).

Although there are no confirmed records from Gulf of Mexico waters beyond U.S. boundaries, Bryde's whales may occur in other parts of the Gulf of Mexico (Jefferson *et al.* 2008), which is also composed of waters belonging to Mexico and Cuba where there is currently little information on cetacean species abundance and distribution. U.S. waters comprise about 40% of the entire Gulf of Mexico and 35% of the oceanic (i.e., >200m) Gulf of Mexico. However, there is currently no information on abundance and distribution of Bryde's whales in these other waters.

POPULATION SIZE

The best abundance estimate available for northern Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whales is 33 (CV=1.07; Table 1). This estimate is from a summer 2009 oceanic survey covering waters from the 200m isobath to the seaward extent of the U.S. EEZ.

Earlier abundance estimates

Please see Appendix IV for a summary of abundance estimates, including earlier estimates and survey descriptions.

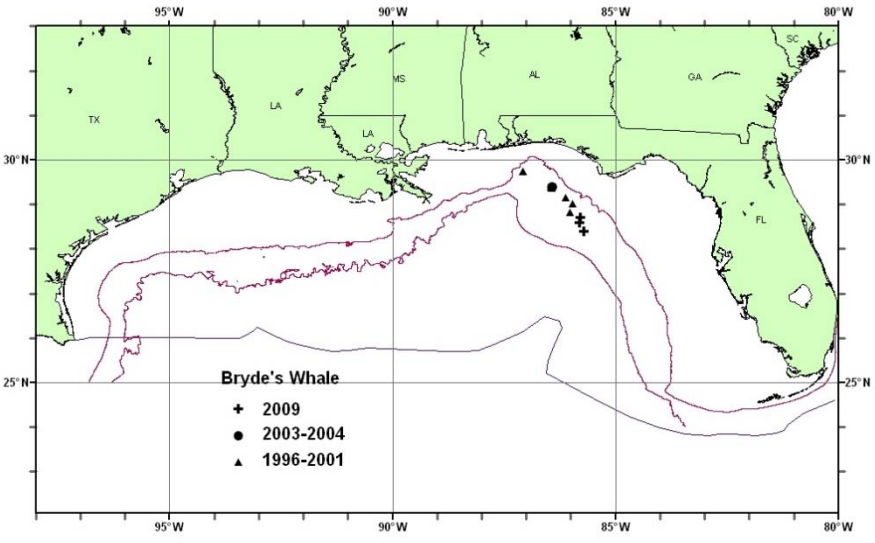

Figure 1. *Distribution of Bryde's whale sightings from SEFSC vessel surveys during spring 1996-2001, summer 2003 and spring 2004, and summer 2009. All the on-effort sightings are shown, though not all were used to estimate abundance. Solid lines indicate the 100m and 1,000m isobaths and the offshore extent of the U.S. EEZ.*

Recent survey and abundance estimate

During summer 2009, a line-transect survey dedicated to estimating the abundance of oceanic cetaceans was conducted in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Survey lines were stratified in relation to depth and the location of the Loop Current. The abundance estimate for Bryde's whales in oceanic waters during 2009 was 33 (CV=1.07; Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of abundance estimates for northern Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whales. 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
Apr-Jun 1991-1994	Oceanic waters	35	1.10
Apr-Jun 1996-2001 (excluding 1998)	Oceanic waters	40	0.61
Jun-Aug 2003, Apr-Jun 2004	Oceanic waters	15	1.98
Jun-Aug 2009	Oceanic waters	33	1.07

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for Bryde's whales is 33 (CV=1.07). The minimum population estimate for the northern Gulf of Mexico is 16 Bryde's whales.

Current Population Trend

A trend analysis has not been conducted for this stock. Four point estimates of Bryde's whale abundance have been made based on data from line-transect surveys covering 1991-2009 (Table 1). The estimates vary by a maximum factor of nearly three, but the precision of the estimates is very poor. The vast majority of the small number of Bryde's whale sightings from each survey occurred in a very restricted area of the northeastern Gulf (Figure 1) during surveys that uniformly sampled the entire oceanic northern Gulf. Because the population size is small, in order to effectively monitor trends in Bryde's whale abundance in the future, other methods need to be used.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. 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 the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate and a recovery factor (MMPA Sec. 3.16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is 16. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The recovery factor, is0.1 because the stock is very small, exhibits very low genetic diversity and appears to represent a unique and possibly endemic evolutionary lineage of Bryde's whale. PBR for the northern Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale is 0.03, equivalent to 1 take every 33 years.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

The fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock during 2009–2013 for observed fisheries and strandings identified as fishery-caused was 0. Additional mean annual mortality and serious injury during 2009–2013 due to other human-caused actions (ship strike) was 0.2. The minimum total mean annual human-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock during 2009–2013 was 0.2.

New Serious Injury Guidelines

NMFS updated its serious injury designation and reporting process, which uses guidance from previous serious injury workshops, expert opinion, and analysis of historic injury cases to develop new criteria for distinguishing serious from non-serious injury (Angliss and DeMaster 1998; Andersen *et al*. 2008; NOAA 2012). NMFS defines serious injury as an "*injury that is more likely than not to result in mortality*". Injury determinations for stock assessments revised in 2013 or later incorporate the new serious injury guidelines, based on the most recent 5-year period for which data are available.

Fisheries Information

The commercial fishery that potentially could interact with this stock in the Gulf of Mexico is the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico large pelagic longline fishery (Appendix III). Pelagic swordfish, tunas and

billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the northern Gulf of Mexico. There has been no reported fishing-related mortality or serious injury of a Bryde's whale by this fishery during 1998-2013 (Yeung 1999; Yeung 2001; Garrison 2003; Garrison and Richards 2004; Garrison 2005; Fairfield Walsh and Garrison 2006; Fairfield-Walsh and Garrison 2007; Fairfield and Garrison 2008; Garrison *et al.* 2009; Garrison and Stokes 2010; 2012a,b; 2013, 2014).

Other Mortality

There were 3 reported strandings of Bryde's whales in the Gulf of Mexico during 2009–2013 (NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database unpublished data, accessed 11 June 2014). During 2009 a Bryde's whale was found floating in the Port of Tampa (Florida). The whale had evidence of premortem and postmortem blunt trauma, and was determined to have been struck by a ship, draped across the bow and carried into port. The whale was a lactating female and measured 12.65m in length. During 2012, 2 Bryde's whale strandings occurred in Louisiana. It could not be determined if there was evidence of human interaction for these strandings. Both whales were in a state of advanced decomposition when observed. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of human and fishery-related mortality and serious injury, particularly for offshore species such as Bryde's whales, because not all of the whales that die or are seriously injured in human interactions wash ashore, or, if they do, they are not all recovered (Peltier *et al*. 2012; Wells *et al*. 2015). Additionally, not all carcasses will show evidence of human interaction, entanglement or other fishery-related interaction due to decomposition, scavenger damage, etc. (Byrd *et al*. 2014). Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of human interaction.

An Unusual Mortality Event (UME) was declared for cetaceans in the northern Gulf of Mexico beginning 1 February 2010; and, as of September 2014, the event is still ongoing (Litz *et al.* 2014). It includes cetaceans that stranded prior to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill (see "Habitat Issues" below), during the spill, and after. The 2 Bryde's whale strandings in 2012 are considered to be part of this UME.

HABITAT ISSUES

The *Deepwater Horizon* (DWH) MC252 drilling platform, located approximately 50 miles southeast of the Mississippi River Delta in waters about 1500 m deep, exploded on 20 April 2010. The rig sank, and over 87 days up to ~4.9 million barrels of oil were discharged from the wellhead until it was capped on 15 July 2010 (McNutt *et al.* 2012). During the response effort dispersants were applied extensively at the seafloor and at the sea surface (Lehr *et al.* 2010; OSAT 2010). In-situ burning, or controlled burning of oil at the surface, was also used extensively as a response tool (Lehr *et al.* 2010). The oil, dispersant and burn residue compounds present ecological concerns (Buist *et al.* 1999; NOAA 2011). The magnitude of this oil spill was unprecedented in U.S. history, causing impacts to wildlife, natural habitats and human communities along coastal areas from western Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle (NOAA 2011). It could be years before the entire scope of damage is ascertained (NOAA 2011).

Shortly after the oil spill, the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process was initiated under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. A variety of NRDA research studies are being conducted to determine potential impacts of the spill on marine mammals. These studies have focused on identifying the type, magnitude, severity, length and impact of oil exposure to oceanic, continental shelf, coastal and estuarine marine mammals. For continental shelf and oceanic cetaceans, the NOAA-led efforts include: aerial surveys to document the distribution, abundance, species and exposure relative to oil from the DWH spill; and ship surveys to evaluate exposure to oil and other chemicals and to assess changes in animal behavior and distribution relative to oil exposure through visual and acoustic surveys, deployment of passive acoustic monitoring systems, collection of tissue samples, and deployment of satellite tags on sperm and Bryde's whales.

Vessel and aerial surveys documented bottlenose dolphins, Atlantic spotted dolphins, rough-toothed dolphins, spinner dolphins, pantropical spotted dolphins, Risso's dolphins, striped dolphins, sperm whales, dwarf/pygmy sperm whales and a Cuvier's beaked whale swimming in oil or potentially oil-derived substances (e.g., sheen, mousse) in the offshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico following the DWH oil spill. Given the cumulative oiling footprint of the spill compared to historical Bryde's whale sightings, it is likely the Bryde's whale stock was also exposed to oil during the event (ERMA 2014). The effects of oil exposure on marine mammals depend on a number of factors including the type and mixture of chemicals involved, the amount, frequency and duration of exposure, the route of exposure (inhaled, ingested, absorbed, or external) and biomedical risk factors of the particular animal (Geraci 1990). In general, direct external contact with petroleum compounds or dispersants with skin may cause skin irritation, chemical burns and infections. For baleen whales, oil can foul the baleen they use to filter-feed. Inhalation of volatile petroleum compounds or dispersants may irritate or injure the respiratory tract, which could lead to pneumonia or inflammation. Ingestion of petroleum compounds may cause injury to the

gastrointestinal tract, which could affect an animal's ability to digest or absorb food. Absorption of petroleum compounds or dispersants may damage kidney, liver and brain function in addition to causing immune suppression and anemia. Long term chronic effects such as lowered reproductive success and decreased survival may occur (Geraci 1990).

STATUS OF STOCK

The Bryde's whale is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, but the northern Gulf of Mexico stock is considered strategic under the MMPA because the mean annual human-caused mortality and serious injury exceeds PBR. The status of Bryde's whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico, relative to OSP, is unknown. There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock.

In April 2015 NMFS made a positive 90-day finding on a petition to list the Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale as an endangered distinct population segment under the ESA. NMFS is currently conducting a status review of the Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale to determine if the petitioned action is warranted.

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