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HUMPBACK WHALE (*Megaptera novaeangliae*): Western North Pacific Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The humpback whale is distributed worldwide in all ocean basins, though it is less common in Arctic waters. In winter, most humpback whales occur in the temperate and tropical waters of the North and South Hemispheres (from 10°-23° latitude). Humpback whales in the North Pacific are seasonal migrants that feed on zooplankton and small schooling fishes in the cool, coastal waters of the western United States, western Canada, and the Russian Far East (NMFS 1991). The historic feeding range of humpback whales in the North Pacific encompassed coastal and inland waters around the Pacific Rim from Point Conception, California, north to the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, and west along the Aleutian Islands to the Kamchatka Peninsula and into the Sea of Okhotsk (Nemoto 1957, Tomlin 1967, Johnson and Wolman 1984). These recent sightings clearly demonstrate that the Bering Sea remains an important feeding area. Humpback whales have been known to enter the Chukchi Sea (Johnson and Wolman 1984). The humpback whale population in much of this range was considerably reduced as a result of intensive commercial exploitation during the 20th century.

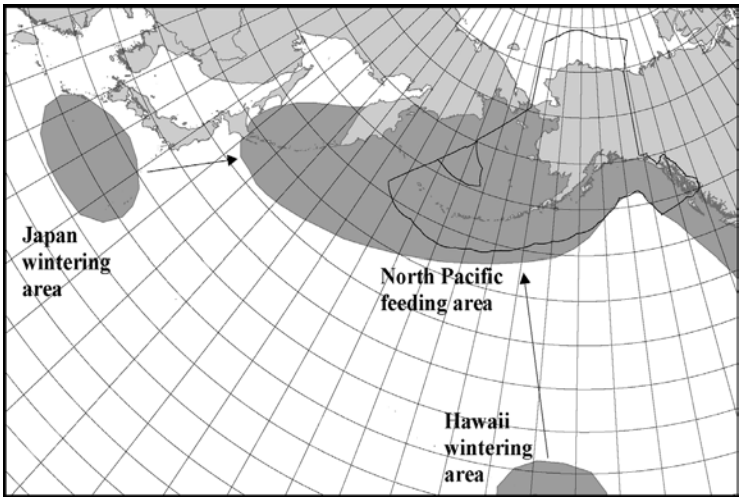

Figure 33. Approximate distribution of humpback whales in the western North Pacific (shaded area). Feeding and wintering grounds are presented above (see text). See Figure 34 for humpback whale distribution in the eastern North Pacific.

Recent surveys in the central-eastern and southeastern Bering Sea in 1999 and 2000 resulted in new information about the distribution of humpback whales in these areas (Moore et al. 2002). The only sightings of humpback whales in the central-eastern Bering Sea was southwest of St. Lawrence Island; animals co-occurred with a group of killer whales and a large aggregation of Arctic cod. A few sightings occurred in the southeast Bering Sea, primarily outside Bristol Bay (Moore et al. 2002).

Aerial, vessel, and photo-identification surveys and genetic analyses indicate that within the U. S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) there are at least three relatively separate populations that migrate between their respective summer/fall feeding areas to winter/spring calving and mating areas (Calambokidis et al. 1997, Baker et al. 1998, Figs. 33 and 34): 1) winter/spring populations in coastal Central America and Mexico which migrate to the coast of California to southern British Columbia in summer/fall (Calambokidis et al. 1989, Steiger et al. 1991, Calambokidis et al. 1993) referred to as the California/Oregon/Washington and Mexico stock; 2) winter/spring populations of the Hawaiian Islands which migrate to northern British Columbia/Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound west to Kodiak (Baker et al. 1990, Perry et al. 1990, Calambokidis et al. 1997) - referred to as the Central North Pacific stock; and 3) winter/spring populations of Japan which, based on Discovery Tag information, probably migrate to waters west of the Kodiak Archipelago (the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands) in summer/fall (Berzin and Rovnin 1966, Nishiwaki 1966, Darling 1991) - referred to as the Western North Pacific stock. Winter/spring populations of humpback whales also occur near Mexico's offshore islands. The migratory destination of these whales is not well known (Calambokidis et al. 1993, Calambokidis et al. 1997). Some recent exchange between winter/spring areas has been documented (Darling and McSweeney 1985, Baker et al. 1986, Darling and Cerchio 1993), as well as movement between Japan and British Columbia, and Japan and the Kodiak Archipelago (Darling et al. 1996, Calambokidis et al. 1997).

Currently, there are insufficient data to apply the Dizon et al.(1992) phylogeographic approach to classify population structure in humpback whales. Until further information becomes available, three stocks of humpback whales (as described above) are recognized within the U.S. EEZ of the North Pacific: one in the Eastern North Pacific (the

California/Oregon/Washington - Mexico stock), one in the Central North Pacific, and one in the Western North Pacific. The California/Oregon/Washington - Mexico humpback whale stock is reported separately in the Stock Assessment Reports for the Pacific Region.

Little is known about the feeding areas located in U.S. waters for the western North Pacific humpback whale stock. There has only been one study designed to photo-identify individual animals in the North Pacific waters west of the Kodiak Archipelago (Waite et al. 1999). Over 3 years, this study collected photographs of 127 individuals located near Kodiak Island, 22 individuals located near the Shumagin Islands, 8 individuals located offshore to the southeast of the Shumagin Islands, and 7 individuals located near Akutan Island in the eastern Aleutian Islands. Only 7 of these individuals have been documented in Prince William Sound or Southeast Alaska. Waite et al. (1999) provide strong evidence that the waters around Kodiak support a discrete feeding aggregation, and it is unknown where these whales spend the winters. The lack of effort in the waters west of the Kodiak Archipelago is likely responsible for the fact that none of the whales identified off Japan have been resighted in the historical feeding areas of the stock (Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands). Individuals identified off Japan, however, have been resighted in the eastern North Pacific (Darling et al. 1996, Calambokidis et al. 1997). This may indicate that the western North Pacific humpback whale stock did not exclusively use the feeding areas in the western Pacific, or that a shift in the migratory destination of this stock has occurred. Thus, some unknown fraction of whales from the wintering grounds off Japan spend their summers feeding in areas typically utilized by whales from the central North Pacific stock.

POPULATION SIZE

The abundance estimate of humpback whales in the North Pacific is based on data collected by nine independent research groups that conducted photo-identification studies of humpback whales in the three wintering areas (Mexico, Hawaii, and Japan). Photographs taken between 1991 and 1993 were used to estimate abundance because samples throughout the entire North Pacific were the largest and most complete during this period. Using Darroch's (1961) method, which utilizes only data from wintering areas (in this case data provided by two Japanese research groups), and averaging the 1991-92, 1992-93, and 1991-93 winter release-recovery information results in an abundance estimate of 394 (CV = 0.084) for the Western North Pacific humpback whale stock (Calambokidis et al. 1997).

A vessel survey conducted in August of 1994 covered 2,050 nautical miles of trackline south of the Aleutian Islands encountered humpback whales in scattered aggregations (57 sightings) throughout the study area (Forney and Brownell 1996). It is unknown whether the humpback whales encountered during this survey belonged to the Western or Central North Pacific stock.

A vessel survey for cetaceans was conducted in the central Bering Sea in July-August 1999 in cooperation with research on commercial fisheries (Moore et al. 2000). The survey included 6,043 nmi of tracklines, most of which were West of St. Matthew Island, north of the 200m bathymetric contour, and south of the U.S./Russia Convention Line. Ten on-effort sightings of humpback whales occurred during this survey, the majority of which took place along the eastern Aleutian chain and near the U.S./Russian Convention Line just south of St. Lawrence Island. If these localized sightings are extrapolated to the entire survey area, an estimated abundance of 1,175 humpback whales (95% CI 197-7,009) occur in the central Bering Sea during the summer. However, Moore et al. (2002) determined that these sightings were too clumped in the central-eastern Bering Sea to be used to provide a reliable estimate for the area. Sightings of humpback whales also occurred during the survey conducted in the eastern Bering Sea in 2000; these sightings resulted in an estimated abundance of 102 (95% CI = 40-262). It is unknown whether these animals belong to the central or western North Pacific stock of humpback whales.

Photo-identification studies initiated to the west of Kodiak Island in 1999 have identified approximately 350 individual humpback whales, and matches between these animals and animals documented in Hawaii, Japan and Mexico have occurred (B. Witteveen, unpublished report). It is not known how many animals occurring to the west of Kodiak Island belong to the western or central North Pacific stock.

There are no reliable estimates for the abundance of humpback whales at feeding areas for this stock because the specific feeding areas are largely unknown.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) for this stock is calculated according to Equation 1 from the PBR Guidelines (Wade and Angliss 1997): $N_{MIN} = N/\exp(0.842\times[\ln(1+[CV(N)]^2)]^{½})$. Using the population estimate (N) of 394 and its associated CV(N) of 0.084, N_{MIN} for this humpback whale stock is 367.

Current Population Trend

Reliable information on trends in abundance for the Western North Pacific humpback whale stock are currently not available.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Utilizing a birth-interval model, Barlow and Clapham (1997) have estimated a population growth rate of 6.5% (SE = 1.2%) for the well-studied humpback whale population in the Gulf of Maine. However, there are no estimates of the growth rate of humpback whale populations in the North Pacific (Best 1993). Hence, until additional data become available from this or other North Pacific humpback whale stocks, 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: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock is 0.1, the value for cetacean stocks listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (Wade and Angliss 1997). Thus, for the Western North Pacific stock of humpback whale, PBR = 0.7 animals ($367 \times 0.02 \times 0.1$).

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Six different commercial fisheries operating in Alaska waters within the range of this stock were monitored for incidental take by fishery observers during 1990-2000: Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands groundfish trawl, longline, and pot fisheries, and Gulf of Alaska groundfish trawl, longline, and pot fisheries. One humpback whale mortality was observed in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands groundfish trawl fishery during both 1998 and 1999. Average annual mortality from observed fisheries was 0.6 humpbacks from this stock (Table 26). Note, however, that the stock identification is uncertain and the mortality may have been attributable to the central North Pacific stock of humpback whales. Thus, this mortality is assigned to both the central and western stocks.

An additional source of information on the number of humpback whales killed or injured incidental to commercial fishery operations is the self-reported fisheries information required of vessel operators by the MMPA. During the period between 1990 and 2001, there were no fisher self-reports of humpback whale injuries or mortalities from interactions with commercial fishing gear in any Alaska fishery within the presumed range of the Western North Pacific humpback whale stock. Logbook data are available for part of 1989-94, after which incidental mortality reporting requirements were modified. Under the new system, logbooks are no longer required; instead, fishers provide self-reports. Data for the 1994-95 phase-in period is fragmentary. After 1995, the level of reporting dropped dramatically, such that the records are considered incomplete and estimates of mortality based on them represent minimums (see Appendix 7 for details).

Strandings of humpback whales entangled in fishing gear or with injuries caused by interactions with gear are another source of mortality data. The only fishery-related humpback stranding in an area thought to be occupied by animals from this stock was reported by a U. S. Coast Guard vessel in late June 1997 operating near the Bering Strait. The whale was found floating dead entangled in netting and trailing orange buoys (National Marine Mammal Laboratory, Platforms of Opportunity Program, unpubl. data, 7600 Sand Point Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115). With the given data it is not possible to determine which fishery (or even which country) caused the mortality. Note, that this mortality has been attributed the Western North Pacific stock, but without a tissue sample (for genetic analysis) or a photograph (for matching to known Japanese animals) it is not possible to be for certain (i.e., it may have belonged to the Central North Pacific stock). Averaging this mortality over the 5-year period 1994-99 results in an estimated annual mortality of 0.2 humpback whales from this stock. This estimate is considered a minimum because not all entangled animals strand and not all stranded animals are found, or reported.

Table 26. Summary of incidental mortality of humpback whales (western North Pacific stock) due to commercial fisheries from 1990-2001 and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate. Mean annual mortality in brackets represents a minimum estimate. For a particular fishery, the most recent 5 years of available data are used in the mortality calculation when more than 5 years of data are provided. *The humpback whale mortality from 1998 was seen by an observer but not during an "observed set"; thus quantification of effort cannot be accomplished and the single record cannot be extrapolated to provide a total estimated mortality level. n/a indicates that data are not available.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Range of observer coverage	Observed mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Bering Sea/Aleutian Is. (BSAI) groundfish trawl	97-01	obs data	62-77%	0, 0, 1, 0, 0	0, 1*, 1, 0, 0	0.6 (CV = 0.44)
Observer program total						0.6
				Reported mortalities		
Unknown fishery (Bering Sea)	94-01	strand data	n/a	0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0	$0.2	[$0.2]
Minimum total annual mortality						[$0.8]

The estimated annual mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is 0.8 (0.6 from observed fisheries plus 0.2 from the stranding data) whales per year from this stock. However, this estimate is considered a minimum because there are no data concerning fishery-related mortalities in Japanese, Russian, or international waters. In addition, there is a small probability that fishery interactions discussed in the assessment for the Central North Pacific stock may have involved animals from this stock because the only known matches to feeding areas come from areas typically used by the Central North Pacific stock.

Brownell et al. (2000) compiled records of bycatch in Japanese and Korean commercial fisheries between 1993 and 2000. During the period 1995-99, there were six humpback whales indicated as "bycatch". In addition, two strandings were reported during this period. Furthermore, analysis of four samples from meat found in markets indicated that humpback whales are being sold. At this time, it is not known whether any or all strandings were caused by incidental interactions with commercial fisheries; similarly, it is not known whether the humpback whales identified in market samples were killed as a result of incidental interactions with commercial fisheries. It is also not known which fishery may be responsible for the bycatch. Regardless, these data indicate a minimum mortality level of 1.1/year (using bycatch data only) to 2.4/year (using bycatch, stranding, and market data) in the waters of Japan and Korea.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

Subsistence hunters in Alaska and Russia have not been reported to take humpback whales from this stock.

HISTORIC WHALING

The number of humpback whales in the North Pacific may have numbered approximately 15,000 individuals prior to exploitation (Rice 1978). Intensive commercial whaling removed more than 28,000 animals from the North Pacific during the 20th century (Rice 1978). This mortality estimate likely underestimates the actual kill as a result of under-reporting of the Soviet catches (Yablokov 1994).

STATUS OF STOCK

The estimated human-related annual mortality rate (0.8) exceeds the PRB level for this stock (0.7). At least one of the mortalities occurred in a U. S. fishery; therefore, the estimated fishery mortality and serious injury rate exceeds 10% of the PBR (0.07). The rate cannot be considered insignificant and approaching zero. The humpback whale is listed as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act, and therefore designated as "depleted" under the MMPA. As a

result, the Western North Pacific humpback whale stock is classified as a strategic stock. Reliable population trend data and the status of this stock relative to its Optimum Sustainable Population size are currently unknown. Noise pollution from the U. S. Navy's Low Frequency Active sonar program and other anthropogenic sources (i.e., shipping) is a potential concern as to the health of this stock.

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