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SEI WHALE (*Balaenoptera borealis*): Eastern North Pacific Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) only considers one stock of sei whales in the North Pacific (Donovan 1991), but some evidence exists for multiple populations (Masaki 1977; Mizroch et al. 1984; Horwood 1987). Sei whales are distributed far out to sea in temperate regions of the world and do not appear to be associated with coastal features. Whaling effort for this species was distributed continuously across the North Pacific between 45-55°N (Masaki 1977). Two sei whales that were tagged off California were later killed off Washington and British Columbia (Rice 1974) and the movement of tagged animals has been noted in many other regions of the North Pacific. Sei whales are now rare in California waters (Dohl et al. 1983; Barlow 1997; Forney et al. 1995; Mangels and Gerrodette 1994), but were the fourth most common whale taken by California coastal whalers in the 1950s-1960s (Rice 1974). They are extremely rare south of California (Wade and Gerrodette 1993; Lee 1993). Lacking additional information on sei whale population structure, sei whales in the eastern North Pacific (east of longitude 180°) will be considered as a separate stock.

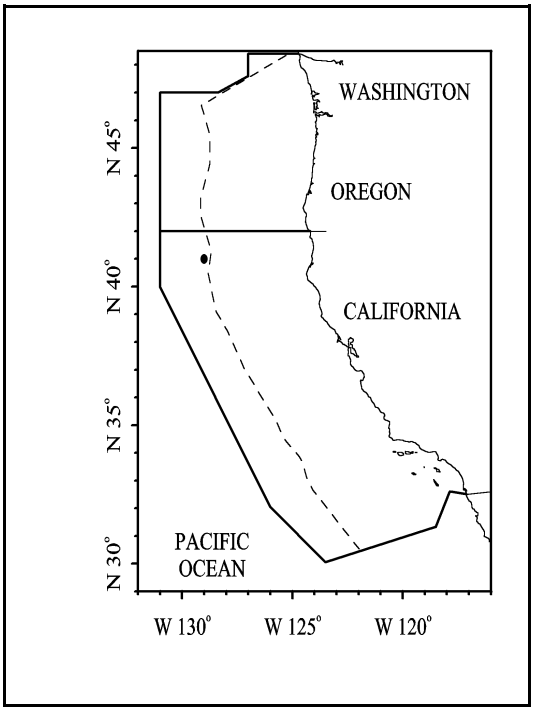

Figure 1. Sei whale sighting locations based on aerial and shipboard surveys off California, Oregon, and Washington, 1991-96 (see Appendix 2, Figures 1-5 for data sources and information on timing and location of surveys). Dashed line represents the U.S. EEZ; bold line indicates the outer boundary of all surveys combined.

POPULATION SIZE

Ohsumi and Wada (1974) estimate the pre-whaling abundance of sei whales to be 58,000-62,000 in the North Pacific. Later, Tillman (1977) used a variety of different methods to estimate the abundance of sei whales in the North Pacific and revised this pre-whaling estimate to 42,000. His estimates for the year 1974 ranged from 7,260 to 12,620. All methods depend on using the history of catches and trends in CPUE or sighting rates; there have been no direct estimates of sei whale abundance in the entire (or eastern) North Pacific based on sighting surveys. Only one confirmed sighting of sei whales and 5 possible sightings (identified as sei or Bryde's whales) were made in California waters during extensive ship and aerial surveys in 1991, 1992, 1993, and 1996 (Hill and Barlow 1992; Carretta and Forney 1993; Mangels and Gerrodette 1994; VonSaunder and Barlow 1999). Green et al. (1992) did not report any sightings of sei whales in aerial surveys of Oregon and Washington. There are no abundance estimates for sei whales along the west coast of the U.S. or in the eastern North Pacific.

Minimum Population Estimate

Minimum population estimates do not exist for sei whales in the eastern North Pacific.

Current Population Trend

There are no data on trends in sei whale abundance in the eastern North Pacific waters. Although the population in the North Pacific is expected to have grown since being given protected status in 1976, the possible effects of continued unauthorized take (Yablokov 1994) and incidental ship strikes and gillnet mortality make this uncertain.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

There are no estimates of the growth rate of sei whale populations in the North Pacific (Best 1993).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

No estimate exists for the minimum abundance of the eastern North Pacific stock of sei whales. Estimates for

the entire North Pacific are more than 10 years old and do not include statistical estimates of precision. Consequently, PBR levels cannot be calculated.

HUMAN CAUSED MORTALITY

Historic Whaling

The reported take of North Pacific sei whales by commercial whalers totaled 61,500 between 1947 and 1987 (C. Allison, IWC, pers. comm.). Of these, 384 were taken by-shore-based whaling stations in central California between 1958 and 1965 (Rice 1974). An additional 26 were taken off central and northern California between 1919 and 1926 (Clapham et al. 1997). There has been an IWC prohibition on taking sei whales since 1976, and commercial whaling in the U.S. has been prohibited since 1972.

Fishery Information

The offshore drift gillnet fishery is the only fishery that is likely to take sei whales from this stock, but no fishery mortalities or serious injuries have been observed (Table 1). Detailed information on this fishery is provided in Appendix 1. After the 1997 implementation of a Take Reduction Plan, which included skipper education workshops and required the use of pingers and minimum 6-fathom extenders, overall cetacean entanglement rates in the drift gillnet fishery dropped considerably (Barlow and Cameron 1999). Because of the changes in this fishery after implementation of the Take Reduction Plan, mean annual takes for this fishery (Table 1) are based only on 1997-98 data. This results in an average estimate of zero sei whales taken annually. However, some gillnet mortality of large whales may go unobserved because whales swim away with a portion of the net.

Table 1. Summary of available information on the incidental mortality and injury of sei whales (eastern North Pacific stock) for commercial fisheries that might take this species (Julian 1997; Julian and Beeson 1998; Cameron and Forney 1999). n/a indicates that data are not available. Mean annual takes are based on 1994-98 data unless noted otherwise.

Fishery Name	Year(s)	Data Type	Percent Observer Coverage	Observed Mortality	Estimated Mortality (CV in parentheses)	Mean Annual Takes (CV in parentheses)
CA/OR thresher shark/swordfish drift gillnet fishery	1994-98	observer data	12-23%	0,0,0,0,0	0,0,0,0,0	0[1]
Total annual takes						0

[1] Only 1997-98 mortality estimates are included in the average because of gear modifications implemented within the fishery as part of a 1997 Take Reduction Plan. Gear modifications included the use of net extenders and acoustic warning devices (pingers).

Ship Strikes

Ship strikes may occasionally kill sei whales as they have been shown to kill their larger relatives: blue and fin whales. No ship strikes have been reported for this species in this area.

STATUS OF STOCK

Previously, sei whales were estimated to have been reduced to 20% (8,600 out of 42,000) of their pre-whaling abundance in the North Pacific (Tillman 1977). The initial abundance has never been reported separately for the eastern North Pacific stock, but this stock was also probably depleted by whaling. Sei whales are formally listed as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and consequently the eastern North Pacific stock is automatically considered as a "depleted" and "strategic" stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Total estimated fishery mortality is zero and therefore is “approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate”. The increasing levels of anthropogenic noise in the world’s oceans has been suggested to be a habitat concern for whales, particularly for baleen whales that may communicate using low-frequency sound.

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