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FIN WHALE (*Balaenoptera physalus*): Western North Atlantic Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) has proposed stock boundaries for North Atlantic fin whales. Fin whales off the eastern United States, Nova Scotia and the southeastern coast of Newfoundland are believed to constitute a single stock under the present IWC scheme (Donovan 1991). However, the stock identity of North Atlantic fin whales has received relatively little attention, and whether the current stock boundaries define biologically isolated units has long been uncertain. The existence of a subpopulation structure was suggested by local depletions that resulted from commercial overharvesting (Mizroch *et al.* 1984).

A genetic study conducted by Bérubé *et al.* (1998) using both mitochondrial and nuclear DNA provided strong support for an earlier population model proposed by Kellogg (1929) and others. This postulates the existence of several subpopulations of fin whales in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean with limited gene flow among them. Bérubé *et al.* (1998) also proposed that the North Atlantic population showed recent divergence due to climatic changes (i.e., postglacial expansion), as well as substructuring over even relatively short distances. The genetic data are consistent with the idea that different subpopulations use the same feeding ground, a hypothesis that was also originally proposed by Kellogg (1929).

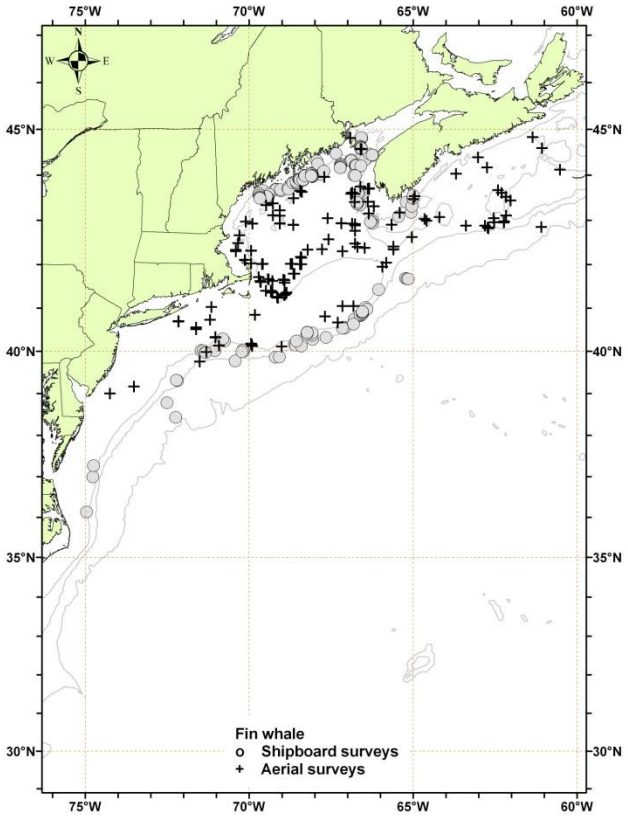

Figure 1. *Distribution of fin whale sightings from NEFSC and SEFSC shipboard and aerial surveys during the summers of 1998, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2007. Isobaths are the 100-m, 1000-m and 4000-m depth contours.*

Fin whales are common in waters of the U. S. Atlantic Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), principally from Cape Hatteras northward (Figure 1). Fin whales accounted for 46% of the large whales and 24% of all cetaceans sighted over the continental shelf during aerial surveys (CETAP 1982) between Cape Hatteras and Nova Scotia during 1978-82. While much remains unknown, the magnitude of the ecological role of the fin whale is impressive. In this region fin whales are probably the dominant large cetacean species during all seasons, having the largest standing stock, the largest food requirements, and therefore the largest impact on the ecosystem of any cetacean species (Hain *et al.* 1992; Kenney *et al.* 1997).

New England waters represent a major feeding ground for fin whales. There is evidence of site fidelity by females, and perhaps some segregation by sexual, maturational or reproductive class in the feeding area (Agler *et al.* 1993). Seipt *et al.* (1990) reported that 49% of fin whales sighted on the Massachusetts Bay area feeding grounds were resighted within the same year, and 45% were resighted in multiple years. The authors suggested that fin whales on these grounds exhibited patterns of seasonal occurrence and annual return that in some respects were similar to those shown for humpback whales. This was reinforced by Clapham and Seipt (1991), who showed maternally-directed site fidelity for fin whales in the Gulf of Maine. Information on life history and vital rates is also available in data from the Canadian fishery, 1965-1971 (Mitchell 1974). In seven years, 3,528 fin whales were taken at three whaling stations. The station at Blandford, Nova Scotia, took 1,402 fin whales.

Hain *et al.* (1992), based on an analysis of neonate stranding data, suggested that calving takes place during October to January in latitudes of the U.S. mid-Atlantic region; however, it is unknown where calving, mating, and wintering occurs for most of the population. Results from the Navy's SOSUS program (Clark 1995) indicate a substantial deep-ocean distribution of fin whales. It is likely that fin whales occurring in the U.S. Atlantic EEZ undergo migrations into Canadian waters, open-ocean areas, and perhaps even subtropical or tropical regions. However, the popular notion that entire fin whale populations make distinct annual migrations like some other mysticetes has questionable support in the data; in the North Pacific, year-round monitoring of fin whale calls found no evidence for large-scale migratory movements (Watkins *et al.* 2000).

POPULATION SIZE

The best abundance estimate available for the western North Atlantic fin whale stock is 3,985 (CV=0.24). This is the sum of the estimate derived from the August 2006 Gulf of Maine survey and the estimate derived from the July-August 2007 northern Labrador to Scotian Shelf survey. The abundance estimates of fin whales include a percentage of the estimate of animals identified as fin/sei whales (the two species being sometimes hard to distinguish). The percentage used is the ratio of positively identified fin whales to the total number of positively identified fin whales and positively identified sei whales.

Earlier abundance estimates

Please see Appendix IV for earlier abundance estimates. As recommended in the GAMMS Workshop Report (Wade and Angliss 1997), estimates older than eight years are deemed unreliable and should not be used for PBR determinations.

Recent surveys and abundance estimates

An abundance estimate of 1,925 (CV=0.55) fin whales was derived from a line-transect sighting survey conducted during 12 June to 4 August 2004 by a ship and plane that surveyed 10,761 km of trackline in waters north of Maryland (38ºN) (Table 1; Palka 2006). Shipboard data were collected using the two-independent-team line-transect method and analyzed using the modified direct-duplicate method (Palka 1995) accounting for biases due to school size and other potential covariates, reactive movements (Palka and Hammond 2001), and *g(0)*, the probability of detecting a group on the trackline. Aerial data were collected using the Hiby circle-back line-transect method (Hiby 1999) and analyzed accounting for *g(0)* and biases due to school size and other potential covariates (Palka 2005). The value of *g(0)* used for this estimation was derived from the pooled 2002, 2004 and 2006 aerial survey data.

An abundance of 2,269 (CV=0.37) fin whales was estimated from an aerial survey conducted in August 2006 which covered 10,676 km of trackline in the region from the 2000-m depth contour on the southern edge of Georges Bank to the upper Bay of Fundy and to the entrance of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Table 1; Palka pers. comm.). The value of *g(0)* used for this estimation was derived from the pooled 2002, 2004 and 2006 aerial survey data.

An abundance estimate of 1,716 (CV=0.26) fin whales was generated from the Canadian Trans North Atlantic Sighting Survey (TNASS) in July-August 2007. This aerial survey covered the area from northern Labrador to the Scotian Shelf, providing full coverage of the Atlantic Canadian coast. Estimates from this survey have not yet been corrected for availability and perception biases (Lawson and Gosselin 2009).

Table 1. Summary of recent abundance estimates for western North Atlantic fin whales with 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
Jun-July 2004	Gulf of Maine to lower Bay of Fundy	1,925	0.55
Aug 2006	S. Gulf of Maine to upper Bay of Fundy to Gulf of St. Lawrence	2,269	0.37
July-Aug 2007	N. Labrador to Scotian Shelf	1716	0.26
Aug 2006+Jul-Aug 2007	S. Gulf of Maine to N. Labrador (COMBINED)	3,985	0.24

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 fin whales is 3,985(CV=0.24). The minimum population estimate for the western North Atlantic fin whale is 3,269.

Current Population Trend

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

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. Based on photographically identified fin whales, Agler *et al.* (1993) estimated that the gross annual reproduction rate was at 8%, with a mean calving interval of 2.7 years.

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 (MMPA Sec. 3. 16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is 3,269. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The "recovery" factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, or threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP), is assumed to be 0.10 because the fin whale is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). PBR for the western North Atlantic fin whale is 6.5.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

For the period 2005 through 2009, the minimum annual rate of human-caused mortality and serious injury to fin whales was 2.6 per year (U.S. waters, 2.0; Canadian waters, 0.6). This value includes incidental fishery interaction records, 0.8 (U.S. waters, 0.6; Canadian waters, 0.2); and records of vessel collisions, 1.8 (U.S. waters, 1.4; Canadian waters, 0.4)(Henry *et al.* 2011). Detected mortalities should not be considered an unbiased representation of human-caused mortality. Detections are haphazard and not the result of a designed sampling scheme. As such they represent a minimum estimate of human-caused mortality.

Fishery-Related Serious Injury and Mortality

No confirmed fishery-related mortalities or serious injuries of fin whales have been reported in the NMFS Sea Sampling bycatch database. A review of the records of stranded, floating or injured fin whales for the period 2005 through 2009 on file at NMFS found two records with substantial evidence of fishery interactions causing mortality, and two records resulting in serious injury (Table 2), which results in an annual rate of serious injury and mortality of 0.8 fin whales from fishery interactions. While these records are not statistically quantifiable in the same way as the observer fishery records, they give a minimum count of entanglements for the species.

Table 2. Confirmed human-caused mortality and serious injury records of western North Atlantic fin whales, January 2005 - December 2005.

Date[a]	Report Type[b]	Age, Sex, Length	Location[a]	Assigned Cause: P=primary, S=secondary		Notes/Observations
				Ship strike	Entang./ Fsh.inter	
3/26/2005	mortality	Adult[b] Female 16.3m	off Virginia Beach, VA	P		Extensive hemorrhaging and vertebral fractures

4/3/2005	mortality	Adult[b] Female 18.8m	Southampton, NY	P		Subdermal hemorrhaging
8/23/2005	mortality	Juvenile[b] Male 13.7m	Port Elizabeth, NJ	P		Fresh carcass on bow of ship; extensive hemmorhaging on right side of body
9/11/2005	mortality	Juvenile[b] Male 11.0m	Bonne-Esperance, QC	P		Bottom jaw completely severed/broken
09/13/05[c]	mortality	age & sex unknown	Blanc Sablon, NL	P		Lower jaw broken associated with massive areas of bruising
9/17/2006	serious injury	age & sex unknown 18m (est)	off Mt. Desert Rock, ME		P	Pale skin overall; cyamid load at point of attachment; emaciated; no gear recovered
3/25/2007	mortality	age unknown Female 18.0m	Norfolk, VA	P		Extensive fracturing of ribs, skull, and vertebrae w/ associated hemorrhage & edema
5/24/2007	mortality	age unknown Male	Newark Bay, NJ	P		Hemorrhage (epaxial muscle, diaphragm, pleural lining) and multiple fractures of the ribs, vertebrae, & sternum and the trailing tissue of the animal was marked by propeller cuts
6/25/2007	serious injury	age & sex unknown	Great South Channel		P	Wrap on tail assoc w/ cyamid load; flippers & mouth involved; extremely emaciated; lethargic; no gear recovered
8/11/2007	mortality	age & sex unknown	Cabot Strait, NS		P	Constricting wrap around body, between the head and flippers; no gear recovered
9/26/2007	mortality	Juvenile Male 13m (est)	off Martha's Vineyard, MA		P	Freshly dead, scavenged carcass with gear present; evidence of multiple body wraps with associated hemorrhaging; no gear recovered
7/2/2008	mortality	age unknown Male 14.8m	Barnegat Inlet, NJ	P		Vertebral fractures with associated hemorrhaging; hemorrhaging around ball joint of right flipper

10/1/2009	mortality	age & sex unknown	Port Elizabeth, NJ	P		Fresh carcass with broken flipper, hematomas, and abrasions

a. The date sighted and location provided in the table are not necessarily when or where the serious injury or mortality occurred; rather, this information indicates when and where the whale was first reported beached, entangled, or injured.

b. The gender and length were misreported in the 2006 Stock Assessment Report. This table shows the correct values.

c. Additional record which was not included in previous reports.

Other Mortality

After reviewing NMFS records for 2005 through 2009, nine were found that had sufficient information to confirm the cause of death as collisions with vessels (Table 2; Henry *et al*. 2011). These records constitute an annual rate of serious injury or mortality of 1.8 fin whales from vessel collisions. The number of fin whales taken at three whaling stations in Canada from 1965 to 1971 totaled 3,528 whales (Mitchell 1974).

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of this stock relative to OSP in the U.S. Atlantic EEZ is unknown, but the species is listed as endangered under the ESA. There are insufficient data to determine the population trend for fin whales. The total level of human-caused mortality and serious injury is unknown. NMFS records represent coverage of only a portion of the area surveyed for the population estimate for the stock. The total U.S. fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock derived from the available records is not less than 10% of the calculated PBR, and therefore cannot be considered insignificant and approaching the ZMRG. This is a strategic stock because the fin whale is listed as an endangered species under the ESA.

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