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BLUE WHALE (*Balaenoptera musculus*): Western North Pacific Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) has formally considered only one management stock for blue whales in the North Pacific (Donovan 1991), but up to five populations have been proposed (Reeves et al. 1998). Rice (1974) hypothesized that blue whales from Baja California migrated far offshore to fed in the eastern Aleutians or Gulf of Alaska and returned to feed in California waters; however, he has more recently concluded that the California population is separate from the Gulf of Alaska population (Rice 1992). Length frequency analyses (Gilpatrick et al. 1996) and photo-identification studies (Calambokidis et al. 1995) support separate population status for blue whales feeding off California and those feeding in Alaskan waters. Whaling catch data indicate that whales feeding along the Aleutian Islands are probably part of a central Pacific stock (Reeves et al. 1998), which may migrate to offshore waters north of Hawaii in winter (Berzin and Rovnin 1966). Blue whale feeding aggregations have not been found in Alaska despite several surveys (Leatherwood et al. 1982; Stewart et al. 1987; Forney and Brownell 1996); however, blue whale calls have been recorded there between 1995 and 2001 (Stafford et al. 2001, Stafford 2003).

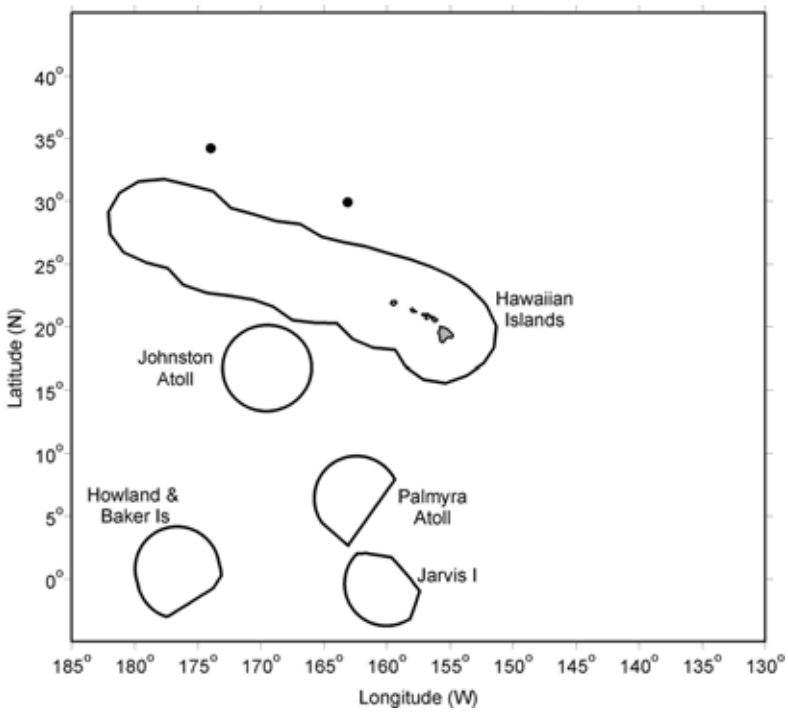

Figure 1. Locations of two blue whale sightings made by observers aboard Hawaii-based longline fishing vessels in July 1994 and February 1997 (NMFS/PIR unpublished data). Solid lines represent the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Recent analyses of acoustic data obtained throughout the North Pacific Ocean (Stafford et al. 2001; Stafford 2003) has revealed two distinct blue whale call types, suggesting two North Pacific stocks: eastern and western. The regional occurrence patterns indicate that blue whales from the eastern North Pacific stock winter off Mexico, central America, and as far south as 8ES (Stafford et al. 1999), and feed during summer off the U. S. West Coast and to a lesser extent in the Gulf of Alaska, and in central North Pacific waters. This stock has previously been documented to feed in waters off California (and occasionally as far north as British Columbia; Calambokidis et al. 1998) in summer/fall (from June to November) migrating south to productive areas off Mexico (Calambokidis et al. 1990) and as far south as the Costa Rica Dome (10^{o} N) in winter/spring (Mate et al. 1999, Stafford et al. 1999). Blue whales belonging to the western Pacific stock appear to feed in summer southwest of Kamchatka, south of the Aleutians, and in the Gulf of Alaska (Stafford 2003; Watkins et al. 2000), and in winter they migrate to lower latitudes in the western Pacific and less frequently in the central Pacific, including Hawaii (Stafford et al. 2001). The only published sighting record of blue whales near Hawaii is that of Berzin and Rovnin (1966). Two sightings have been made by observers on Hawaii-based longline vessels (Figure 1; NMFS/PIR, unpublished data). Additional evidence that blue whales occur in this area comes from acoustic recordings made off Oahu and Midway Islands (Northrop et al. 1971; Thompson and Friedl 1982), which included at least some within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The recordings made off Hawaii showed bimodal peaks throughout the year (Stafford et al. 2001), with western Pacific call types heard during winter and eastern Pacific calls heard during summer. . For the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) stock assessment reports, there are two blue whale stocks within the

Pacific U.S. EEZ: 1) the western North Pacific stock (this report), which includes whales found around the Hawaiian Islands during winter, 2) the eastern North Pacific stock, which feeds primarily off California.

POPULATION SIZE

From ship line-transect surveys, Wade and Gerrodette (1993) estimated 1,400 blue whales for the eastern tropical Pacific. A weighted average estimate of 1,744 blue whales is available for California, Oregon and Washington, based on shipboard line-transect surveys in 1996 and 2002(Barlow 2003a) and photographic mark-recapture estimates (Calambokidis et al. 2003). No data are available to estimate population size for any other North Pacific blue whale population, including the putative central stock that apparently summered along the Aleutians and wintered north of Hawaii. No blue whale sightings were made during a summer 1994 shipboard survey south of the Aleutian Islands (Forney and Brownell 1996), during twelve aerial surveys conducted in 1993-98 within about 25 nmi of the main Hawaiian Islands (Mobley et al. 2000), or during a summer/fall 2002 shipboard surveys of the entire Hawaiian Islands EEZ (Barlow 2003b). Therefore, no estimate of abundance is available for the western Pacific blue whale stock.

Minimum Population Estimate

No data are available to provide a minimum population estimate.

Current Population Trend

No data are available on current population trend.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

No data are available on current or maximum net productivity rate.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

No PBR can be calculated for this stock at this time.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

Information on fishery-related mortality of cetaceans in Hawaiian waters is limited, but the gear types used in Hawaiian fisheries are responsible for marine mammal mortality and serious injury in other fisheries throughout U.S. waters. Gillnets appear to capture marine mammals wherever they are used, and float lines from lobster traps and longlines can be expected to occasionally entangle whales (Perrin et al. 1994). Large whales have been entangled in longline gear off the Hawaiian Islands (Nitta and Henderson 1993, Forney 2004), but no interactions with blue whales were observed in the Hawaii-based longline fishery between 1994 and 2002, with approximately 4-25% of all effort observed (Forney 2004).

Historical Mortality

At least 9,500 blue whales were taken by commercial whalers throughout the North Pacific between 1910 and 1965 (Ohsumi and Wada 1972). Some proportion of this total may have been from a population or populations that migrate seasonally into the Hawaiian EEZ. The species has been protected in the North Pacific by the IWC since 1966.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of blue whales in Hawaiian waters relative to OSP is unknown, and there are insufficient data to evaluate trends in abundance. Blue whales are formally listed as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and consequently the Hawaiian stock is automatically considered as a "depleted" and "strategic" stock under the MMPA. Insufficient information is available to determine whether the total fishery mortality and serious injury for blue whales is insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. Increasing levels of anthropogenic noise in the world's oceans has been suggested to be a habitat concern for blue whales (Reeves et al. 1998).

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