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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 in the North Pacific it does not occur in Arctic waters. In winter, most humpback whales occur in the subtropical and tropical waters of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Humpback whales in the high latitudes of the North Pacific are seasonal migrants that feed on euphausiids and small schooling fishes (NMFS 1991, Clapham and Mead 1999). 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). The Asian wintering area extends from the South China Sea east through the Philippines, Ryukyu Retto, Ogasawara Gunto, Mariana Islands, and Marshall Islands (Rice 1998). The humpback whale population in much of this range was considerably reduced as a result of intensive commercial exploitation during the 20th century.

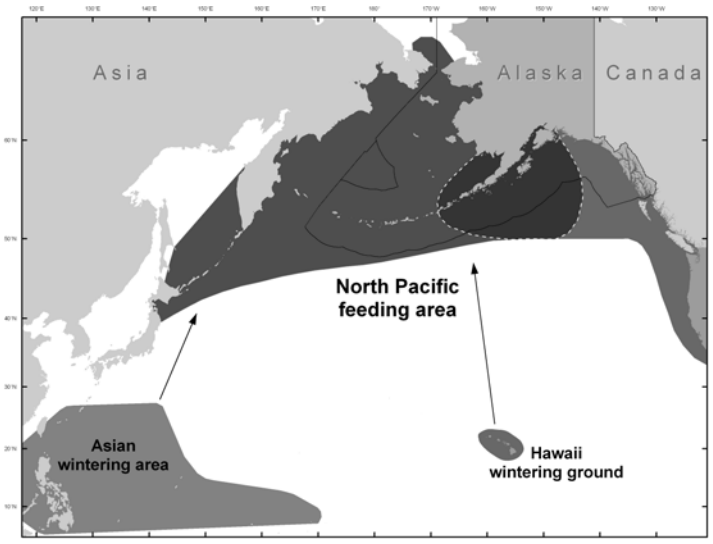

Figure 38. Approximate distribution of humpback whales in the western North Pacific (shaded area). Feeding and wintering grounds are presented above (see text). Area within the dotted line is known to be an area of overlap with the Central North Pacific stock. See Figure 39 for humpback whale distribution 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 occurred southwest of St. Lawrence Island. A few sightings occurred in the southeastern Bering Sea, primarily outside Bristol Bay and north of the eastern Aleutian Islands (Moore et al. 2002). However, a NOAA survey conducted in 2005 found numerous humpback whales north of the central Aleutian Islands, reinforcing the idea that the Bering Sea is an important feeding area. The historical importance of this area is suggested by the fact that the USSR is known to have killed hundreds of humpback whales in the Bristol Bay area during its illegal whaling operations in the 1960's.

Aerial, vessel, and photo-identification surveys and genetic analyses indicate that within the U. S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) there are at least three 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. 38 and 39): 1) winter/spring populations in coastal Central America and coastal 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 Unimak Pass (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 off Japan which, based on Discovery Mark information, probably migrate primarily to waters west of Unimak Pass (the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands) in summer/fall (Berzin and Rovnin 1966, Nishiwaki 1966, Darling 1991), and possibly to the Kuril Islands, Gulf of Anadyr, and southeastern Chukotka Peninsula (NMML unpublished data). This latter population is referred to as the Western North Pacific stock.

Breeding populations of humpback whales also occur in winter near Mexico's offshore islands in the Revillagigedo Archipelago. 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), although recent preliminary photo-id data suggest some of these whales summer in the western Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. Calambokidis et al. (2001) concludes that there are at least three subpopulations of humpback whales on the wintering grounds (Hawaii, Japan, and Mexico), and possibly as many as six subpopulations, with subdivisions in Mexico, Japan, and Central America.

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. Data from a large-scale study throughout the North Pacific conducted in 2004-06 (the SPLASH project) are expected to provide a much more comprehensive understanding of humpback whale population structure in the North Pacific in the near future.

Available information about feeding areas in U.S. waters for the western stock of humpback whales indicates that there is considerable overlap between the Western North Pacific and Central North Pacific stocks in the Gulf of Alaska between Kodiak Island and the Shumagin Islands. Over 3 years, Waite et al. (1999) 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. Witteveen (2003) conducted a photo-identification study in Marmot and Chiniak Bays (on the northeast side of Kodiak Island), documented 103 individual animals, and estimated that the number of humpback whales in that area totaled 157 (95% CI: 114, 241). Witteveen et al. (2004) reported matches between whales photographed at the Shumagin Islands between 1999 and 2002 and whales photographed in Hawaii, offshore Mexico Islands, coastal Mexico waters, and Japan. In addition, a small number of individuals identified off Japan have been resighted in the eastern North Pacific (Darling et al. 1996, Calambokidis et al. 1997).

In summary, new information from a variety of sources indicates that humpback whales from the Western and Central North Pacific stocks mix on summer feeding grounds in the central Gulf of Alaska and perhaps the Bering Sea.

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 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). However, in light of the low geographic coverage of sampling effort for the western North Pacific population during this time, this is likely to represent an underestimate of the stock's true abundance.

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 200 m 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 and decided to improve upon the method used to stratify the data in the analysis. 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 from 1999 to 2002 have identified 171 individual humpback whales, which resulted in a mark-recapture estimate of 410 (95% CI: 241-683). It is not known how many animals occurring to the west of Kodiak Island belong to the Western or Central North Pacific stock, but matches between animals photographed west of Kodiak Island and animals photographed in Hawaii, offshore Mexico, coastal Mexico, and Japan clearly indicate that overlap between stocks occurs in this area (Witteveen et al. 2004).

There are no reliable estimates for the abundance of humpback whales in feeding areas for this stock because surveys of the known feeding grounds are incomplete, and because not all feeding areas are known.

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, although there are indications that this rate has slowed in recent years (Clapham et al. 2003). Mobley et al. (2001) estimated a trend of 7% for 1993-00 using data from aerial surveys that were conducted in a consistent manner for several years across all of the Hawaiian Islands and were developed specifically to estimate a trend for the Central North Pacific stock. Although there is no estimate of the maximum net productivity rate for the Western stock, it is reasonable to assume that R_{MAX} for this stock would be at least 7%. Hence, until additional data become available from the Western North Pacific humpback whale stock, it is recommended that 7% be employed as the maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) 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 = 1.3 animals (367 × 0.035 × 0.1).

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Until 2004, there were six different federally-regulated commercial fisheries in Alaska that occurred within the range of the Western North Pacific humpback whale stock that were monitored for incidental mortality by fishery observers. As of 2004, changes in fishery definitions in the List of Fisheries have resulted in separating these six fisheries into 22 fisheries (69 FR 70094, 2 December 2004). This change does not represent a change in fishing effort, but provides managers with better information on the component of each fishery that is responsible for the incidental serious injury or mortality of marine mammal stocks in Alaska. Estimates of marine mammal serious injury/mortality in each of these observed fisheries are provided in Perez (2006) and Perez (unpubl. ms.). Between 2000 and 2004, there were incidental serious injuries and mortalities of Western North Pacific humpback whales in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands sablefish pot fishery (Table 35). Average annual mortality from observed fisheries was 0.20 humpbacks from this stock (Table 35). Note, however, that the stock identification is uncertain and the mortality may have involved a whale from the central North Pacific stock of humpback whales. Thus, this mortality is assigned to both the central and western stocks.

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). No strandings or sightings of entangled humpback whales of this stock were reported between 2001 and 2005; however, effort in western Alaska is low.

Table 35. Summary of incidental mortality and serious injury of humpback whales (Western North Pacific stock) due to commercial fisheries from 2001 to 2005 and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate. Mean annual mortality in brackets represents a minimum estimate. Details of how percent observer coverage is measured is included in Appendix 6. N/A indicates that data are not available.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Observer coverage	Observed mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Bering Sea sablefish pot	2001 2002 2003 2004 2005	obs data	38.7 40.6 21.7 49.1 39.2	0 0 0 0 0	0 1[1] 0 0 0	0.20[2] (N/A)
Observer program total						0.20
				Reported mortalities		
Unknown fishery (Bering Sea)	2001-2005	strand data	N/A	0, 0, 0, 0, 0	$0.0	[$0.0]
Minimum total annual mortality						[$0.2]

[1] Mortality 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.
[2] These mortalities occurred in an area of known overlap with the Central North Pacific stock of humpback whales. Since the stock identification is unknown, the mortalities are reflected in both stock assessments.

The estimated annual mortality rate incidental to U. S. commercial fisheries is 0.2 whales per year from this stock based on 0.2 from observed fisheries. 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. Finally, much information on fishery interaction with the Central North Pacific stock is based on information reported to the Alaska Region as stranding data. However, very few stranding reports are received from areas west of Kodiak.

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. Because many mortalities pass unreported, the actual rate in these areas is likely much higher.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

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

HISTORICAL WHALING

Rice (1978) estimated that the number of humpback whales in the North Pacific may have been approximately 15,000 individuals prior to exploitation; however, this was based upon incomplete data and, given the level of known catches (legal and illegal) since World War II, may be an underestimate. Intensive commercial whaling removed more than 28,000 animals from the North Pacific during the 20th century (Rice 1978). From 1961 to 1971, an additional 6,793 humpback whales were killed illegally by the U.S.S.R. Many animals during this period were taken from the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea (Doroshenko 2000); however, additional illegal catches were made across the North Pacific, from the Kuril Islands to the Queen Charlottes, and other takes in earlier years may have gone unrecorded. Humpback whales in the North Pacific were theoretically protected in 1965, but illegal catches by the USSR continued until 1972 (Ivashchenko et al. 2007).

STATUS OF STOCK

The estimated human-related annual mortality rate (0.2) is less than the PBR level for this stock (1.3). The estimated human-related mortality rate is based solely on mortalities that occurred incidental to U. S. commercial fisheries therefore, the estimated fishery mortality and serious injury rate exceeds 10% of the PBR (0.1). 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 stock of humpback whale 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.

HABITAT CONCERNS

Elevated levels of sound from the U. S. Navy's Low Frequency Active Sonar program and other anthropogenic sources (e.g., shipping) is a potential concern for humpback whales in the North Pacific, but no specific habitat concerns have been identified for this stock.

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