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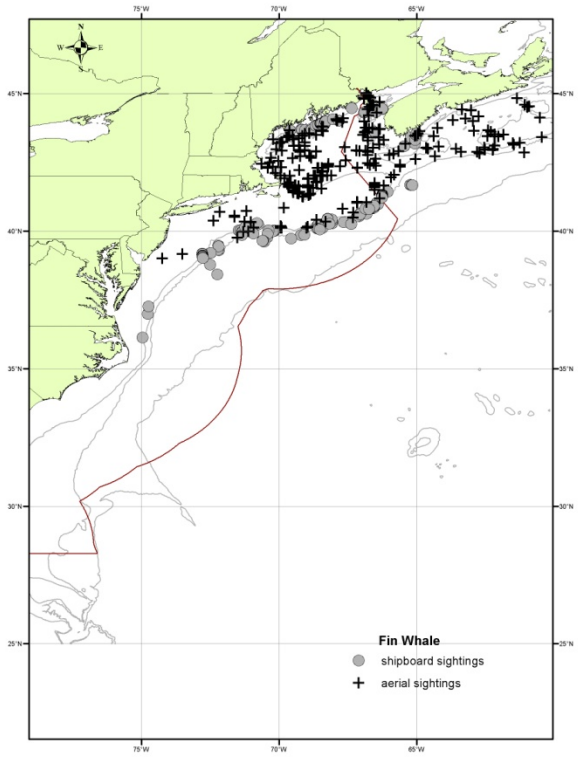
FIN WHALE (*Balaenoptera physalus*): Western North Atlantic Stock

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).

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 the dominant large cetacean species during all seasons, having the largest standing stock, the largest food requirements, and therefore the largest influence on ecosystem processes 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.

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 3,522 (CV=0.27). This is the estimate derived from the Canadian Trans-North Atlantic Sighting Survey (TNASS) in July-August 2007 and is considered best because it covered more of the fin whale range than the other surveys.

Earlier abundance estimates

Please see Appendix IV for earlier abundance estimates. As recommended in the GAMMS II 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 3,522 (CV=0.27; J. Lawson, DFO, pers. comm.) fin whales was generated from the 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. (Lawson and Gosselin 2009). The abundance estimates from this survey have been corrected for perception and availability bias, when possible. In general this involved correcting for perception bias using mark-recapture distance sampling (MRDS), and correcting for availability bias using dive/surface times, as reported in the literature, and the Laake (2007) analysis method (Lawson and Gosselin 2011).

An abundance estimate of 1,595 (CV=0.33) fin whales was generated from a shipboard and aerial survey conducted during June-August 2011 (Palka 2012). The aerial portion that contributed to the abundance estimate covered 5,313 km of tracklines that were over waters north of New Jersey and shallower than the 100-m depth contour, through the U.S. and Canadian Gulf of Maine and up to and including the lower Bay of Fundy. The shipboard portion covered 3,107 km of tracklines that were in waters offshore of North Carolina to Massachusetts (waters that were deeper than the 100-m depth contour out to beyond the U.S. EEZ). Both sighting platforms used a two-simultaneous team data collection procedure, which allows estimation of abundance corrected for perception bias of the detected species (Laake and Borchers, 2004). Estimation of the abundance was based on the independent observer approach assuming point independence (Laake and Borchers 2004) and calculated using the multiple covariate distance sampling (MCDS) option in the computer program Distance (version 6.0, release 2, Thomas *et al.* 2009). 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; the CV of the abundance estimate includes the variance of the estimated fraction. An abundance survey was conducted concurrently in the southern U.S. waters (from North Carolina to Florida). The abundance estimates from this southern survey are being calculated and are not available at this time.

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	3,522	0.27
Jun-Aug 2011	North Carolina to lower Bay of Fundy	1,595	0.33

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 3,522 (CV=0.27). The minimum population estimate for the western North Atlantic fin whale is 2,817.

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 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 2,817. 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 5.6.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

For the period 2006 through 2010, the minimum annual rate of human-caused mortality and serious injury to fin whales was 2.0 per year (U.S. waters, 1.8; Canadian waters, 0.2). This value includes incidental fishery interaction records, 0.8 (U.S. waters, 0.6; Canadian waters, 0.2); and records of vessel collisions, 1.2 (U.S. waters, 1.2; Canadian waters, 0)(Henry *et al.* 2012). Annual rates calculated from detected mortalities should not be considered an unbiased representation of human-caused mortality, but they represent a definitive lower bound. Detections are haphazard and not the result of a designed sampling scheme. As such they represent a minimum estimate of human-caused mortality which is almost certainly biased low.

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 2006 through 2010 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 a minimum annual rate of serious injury and mortality of 0.8 fin whales from fishery interactions. These records are not statistically quantifiable in the same way as the observer fishery records, and they almost surely undercount entanglements for the stock.

Table 2. Confirmed human-caused mortality and serious injury records of Western North Atlantic fin whales *(Balaenoptera physalus)*, 2006 - 2010.

Date[a]	Report Type	Age, Sex, Length	Location[a]	Assigned Cause: P=primary, S=secondary		Notes/Observations
				Ship strike	Entanglement/ Fishery interaction	
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
3/18/2010	mortality	Adult Female 18.6m	off Bethany Beach, DE	P		Fractured skull w/ associated hemorrhaging; abrasion mid-dorsal consistent w/ being folded over the bow of a ship
9/3/2010	mortality	Juvenile Male 9.5m	Cape Henlopen State Park, DE	P		Large laceration & vertebral fractures with associated hemorrhaging

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.

Other Mortality

After reviewing NMFS records for 2006 through 2010, six were found that had sufficient information to confirm the cause of death as collisions with vessels (Table 2; Henry *et al*. 2012). These records constitute an annual rate of serious injury or mortality of 1.2 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

This is a strategic stock because the fin whale is listed as an endangered species under the ESA. 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 is likely biased low and is still not less than 10% of the calculated

PBR. Therefore entanglement rates cannot be considered insignificant and approaching the ZMRG. 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. A final recovery plan for the fin whale was published in 2010 (NMFS 2010).

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