



NEWS RELEASE

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Sperm Whales Reside in Deepwater Gulf of Mexico

MMS Releases Synthesis Report on Six-Year, \$9.3 Million Study Project.

HOUSTON – The Minerals Management Service (MMS) today released the results of a six-year, \$9.3 million study on sperm whales, an endangered species living in the northern Gulf of Mexico. The Sperm Whale Seismic Study (SWSS) focused on the effects of seismic activities on sperm whales living in an area that is highly industrialized with oil and gas exploration and production activities.

One finding supported by SWSS data is that Northern Gulf of Mexico sperm whales are a distinct stock; that is, they show genetic differences from other sperm whales world-wide. Also, based on tag location data, the Gulf sperm whales showed no discernible seasonal migration. The study also did not find any horizontal avoidance of seismic sounds, meaning the whales did not alter their visible behavior on the surface when exposed to seismic sounds.

“I am very pleased that MMS could add such a large volume of data on this endangered species to the scientific body of knowledge,” said Randall Luthi, MMS director. “As oil and gas operations expand further into the deepwater Gulf of Mexico, it is essential for MMS to understand the marine mammals in their environment.”

Fifteen federal and state agencies, universities, and organizations collaborated to meet the study’s objectives: establish baseline information about the whales’ biology and behavior; characterize the whales’ habitat and how the whales use their habitat; and determine possible changes in the whales’ behavior when they experience human-made noise. SWSS was supported by the MMS under a cooperative agreement through the Texas A&M Research Foundation.

Data gathered during SWSS provides insights into daily and seasonal movements, abundance, group structure, diving and other behaviors, habitat characteristics, and response to human-made noise, of sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico. This information will help MMS evaluate whether whales prefer some locations, what effects human activities (such as seismic surveys) may have on the whales, and possible mitigation measures.

According to Carol Roden, an MMS biologist on the project, “SWSS has given scientists a fascinating look at the unique northern Gulf of Mexico sperm whale population. The collaboration and dedication of such a diverse group of researchers made SWSS a multi-faceted effort that approached the study goals from varied perspectives and resulted in new ways to gather data on these endangered animals.”

The report, “Sperm Whale Seismic Study in the Gulf of Mexico: Synthesis Report (MMS 2008-006),” presents results from the SWSS study and gives recommendations for future study. The report is available for download at <http://www.gomr.mms.gov/PI/PDFImages/ESPIS/4/4444.pdf>.

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Photos in jpg format from the study are available upon request.