

PYGMY SPERM WHALE (*Kogia breviceps*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The pygmy sperm whale appears to be distributed worldwide in temperate to tropical waters (Caldwell and Caldwell 1989). Sightings of these animals in the northern Gulf of Mexico occur primarily along the continental shelf edge and over the deeper waters off the continental shelf (Mullin *et al.* 1991; Southeast Fisheries Science Center, SEFSC, unpublished data). Pygmy sperm whales and dwarf sperm whales (*Kogia simus*) are difficult to distinguish and sightings of either species are often categorized as *Kogia* sp. Sightings of this category were documented in all seasons during seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1993-1995 (Hansen *et al.* 1996). Pygmy and dwarf sperm whales have been sighted in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico in waters 1000 m deep, on average (Davis *et al.* 1998). However, these authors cautioned that inferences on preferred bottom depths should await surveys for the entire Gulf of Mexico. The difficulty in sighting pygmy and dwarf sperm whales may be exacerbated by their avoidance reaction towards ships, and change in behavior towards approaching survey aircraft (Würsig *et al.* 1998). In a recent study using hematological and stable-isotope data, Barros *et al.* (1998) speculated that dwarf sperm whales may have a more pelagic distribution than pygmy sperm whales, and/or dive deeper during feeding bouts. There is no information on stock differentiation.

POPULATION SIZE

Estimates of abundance of *Kogia* sp. were derived through the application of distance sampling analysis (Buckland *et al.* 1993) and the computer program DISTANCE (Laake *et al.* 1993) to sighting data collected during 1991-1994 spring-summer, visual sampling, line-transect vessel surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico (Hansen *et al.* 1995) (Fig. 1), which includes data collected as part of the GulfCet program (Hansen *et al.* 1996). These surveys were conducted throughout the area from approximately the 200 m isobath along the USA coast to the seaward extent of the USA Exclusive Economic Zone. The seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys included only a small portion of the species' range and therefore, these data were not used to estimate population size. Estimated abundance of *Kogia* sp. by survey year [coefficient of variation (CV) in parentheses] was 109 in 1991 (0.68), 1,010 in 1992 (0.40), 580 in 1993 (0.45), and 162 in 1994 (0.61) (Hansen *et al.* 1995). Survey effort-weighted estimated abundance of *Kogia* sp. for all surveys combined was 547 (CV = 0.28) (Hansen *et al.* 1995). Estimates of pygmy sperm whale abundance cannot be provided due to uncertainty of species identification at sea.

Minimum Population Estimate

A minimum population estimate could not be calculated because of uncertainty of species identification at sea.

Current Population Trend

There is insufficient information to describe any population trend for this species in the Gulf of Mexico.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are not known for this stock. 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 the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate, and a "recovery" factor (Wade and Angliss 1997). The "recovery" factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, and threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP) is assumed to be 0.5 because this stock is of unknown status. PBR for the pygmy sperm whale is unknown because the minimum population estimate cannot be estimated.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

The level of past or current, direct, human-caused mortality of pygmy sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico is unknown. Available information indicates there likely is little, if any, fisheries interaction with pygmy sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico. There have been no logbook reports of fishery-related mortality or serious injury and no fishery-related mortality or serious injury has been observed.

There have been no documented strandings of pygmy sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1987-October 1998 which have been classified as likely caused by fishery interactions, but there have been stranding investigation reports of pygmy sperm whales which may have died as a result of other human-related causes. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the marine mammals which die or are seriously injured may wash ashore, nor will all of those that do wash ashore necessarily show signs of entanglement or other fishery-interaction. Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of fishery interaction.

Fisheries Information

Pelagic swordfish, tunas, and billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the USA Gulf of Mexico. Total longline effort for the Gulf of Mexico pelagic fishery, including OCS edge, continental slope, and Mexican territorial waters, based on mandatory logbook reporting, was 4,400 sets in 1991, 4,850 sets in 1992, and 3,260 sets in 1993 (Cramer 1994). This fishery has been monitored with about 5% observer coverage, in terms of trips observed, since 1992. There were no reports of mortality or serious injury of pygmy sperm whales by this fishery.

Pair trawl fishing gear has the potential to capture marine mammals, but there have been no reports of mortality or serious injury to marine mammals in the Gulf of Mexico. This fishery has not been observed by NMFS observers, and there are no other data available as to the extent of this fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. It is assumed that it is very limited in scope and duration.

Other Mortality

At least 20 pygmy sperm whale strandings were documented in the northern Gulf of Mexico from 1990 through October 1998. Two of these animals had a plastic bag or pieces thereof in their stomachs (Tarpley and Marwitz 1993, Barros, unpublished data). Another animal stranded apparently due to injuries inflicted by impact, possibly with a vessel.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of this stock relative to OSP is unknown and there are insufficient data to determine population trends. This species is not listed under the Endangered Species Act. Although the PBR cannot be calculated, the total known fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is zero and, therefore, can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. The total level of fishery-related mortality and serious injury is unknown, but it is believed to be insignificant.

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