

MELON-HEADED WHALE (*Peponocephala electra*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The melon-headed whale appears to be distributed worldwide in tropical to sub-tropical waters (Perryman et al. 1994). Sightings of these animals in the northern Gulf of Mexico occur primarily over the deeper waters off the continental shelf (Mullin et al. 1994). Melon-headed whales and pygmy killer whales (*Feresa attenuata*) are difficult to distinguish and sightings of either species are often categorized as pygmy killer/melon-headed whales. Sightings of this category were documented in all seasons during recent seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1993-1995 (Davis et al., in preparation). There is no information on stock differentiation for the Atlantic population.

POPULATION SIZE

Seasonal aerial survey data were insufficient for estimating abundance. Estimates of abundance 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 (Davis et al., in preparation). These surveys were conducted throughout the area from approximately the 200 m iso bath along the U.S. coast to the seaward extent of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. The seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys included only a small portion of the stock range and these data were used for abundance estimation. Estimated abundance of melon-headed whales by survey year [coefficient of variation (CV) in parentheses] was zero in 1991, 3,174 in 1992 (0.54), 827 in 1993 (0.70) and 10,586 in 1994 (0.48) (Hansen et al. 1995). The survey effort-weighted estimated average abundance of melon-headed whales for all surveys combined was 3,965 (CV = 0.39) (Hansen et al. 1995).

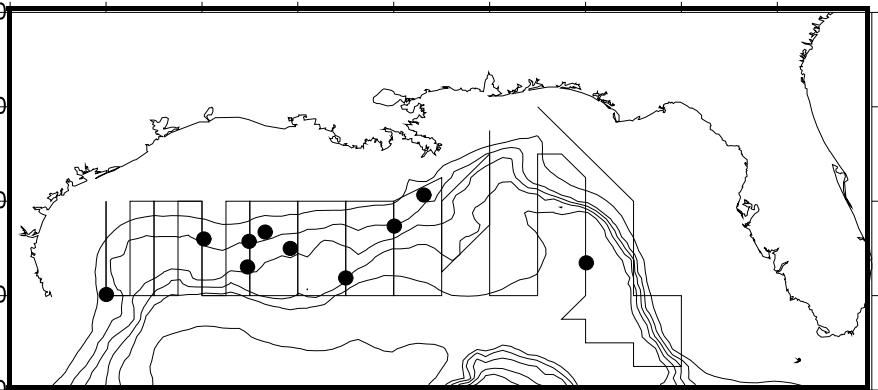


Figure 1. Distribution of melon-headed whale sightings on the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1991-1994. The straight lines show transects during two surveys and are examples of typical survey transects. Isobaths are in 183 m (100 fm) depth intervals.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population size was estimated from the average abundance estimate which was 3,965 (CV = 0.39) (Hansen et al. 1995). The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate, which is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by NMFS (Anon. 1994). The minimum population estimate is 2,888 melon-headed whales.

Current Population Trend

No trend was identified in the annual abundance estimates; however, the 1994 estimate was more than ten times larger than the 1993 estimate and the difference was significant using the criteria of no overlap of log-normal 95% confidence intervals. No melon-headed whales were sighted during 1991, and the differences between the 1992 and 1993 estimates and between the 1993 and 1994 estimates were not significant. The apparent differences in abundance estimates may have been caused by lower sampling effort during 1991, and by low sampling intensity relative to population size (Hansen et al. 1995), or by inter-annual variation in distribution patterns or spatial sampling patterns, rather than changes in population size.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are not known; therefore, the default maximum net productivity rate of 0.04 (Anon. 1994) was used for purposes of this assessment.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal level (PBR) was specified as the product of the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate, and a recovery factor for endangered, threatened, or depleted stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP) (Anon. 1994). The recovery factor was set at 0.50 because the status of the stock relative to OSP is unknown. PBR for this stock is 29 melon-headed whales.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

There has historically been some take of this species in small cetacean fisheries in the Caribbean (Caldwell et al. 1976); however, the level of past or current, direct, human-caused mortality of melon-headed whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico is unknown. Available information indicates there likely is little, if any, fisheries interaction with melon-headed 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 were no documented strandings of melon-headed whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1987-1994 which were classified as likely caused by fishery interactions or 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.

The total known fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is less than 10% of the calculated PBR and, therefore, can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. This determination cannot be made for specific fisheries until the implementing regulations for Section 118 of the MMPA have been reviewed by the public and finalized.

Fisheries Information

Pelagic swordfish, tunas, and billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the U.S. 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 to melon-headed 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.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of this stock relative to OSP is unknown. This species is not listed under the Endangered Species Act. There are insufficient data to determine population trends. The total level of fishery-related mortality and serious injury is unknown, but it is believed to be insignificant relative to PBR; therefore, this is not a strategic stock.

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