

SPINNER DOLPHIN (*Stenella longirostris*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The spinner dolphin is distributed worldwide in tropical to warm temperate waters in the world's oceans (Leatherwood and Reeves 1983; Perrin and Gilpatrick 1994). Sightings of these animals in the northern Gulf of Mexico occur primarily over the deeper waters off the continental shelf [Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) unpublished data]. Spinner dolphins were seen in winter, spring and summer during recent seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1993-1995 (Davis et al., in preparation). Different geographic stocks have been identified in the Pacific based on morphological characteristics (Perrin and Gilpatrick 1994); however, there is no information on stock differentiation for the Atlantic population.

POPULATION SIZE

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 isobath 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 not used for abundance estimation.

Estimated abundance of spinner dolphins by survey year [coefficient of variation (CV) in parentheses] was zero in 1991, 2,593 in 1992 (0.63), 2,336 in 1993 (0.62), and 15,995 in 1994 (0.67) (Hansen et al. 1995). Survey effort-weighted estimated average abundance of spinner dolphins for all surveys combined was 6,316 (CV = 0.43) (Hansen et al. 1995).

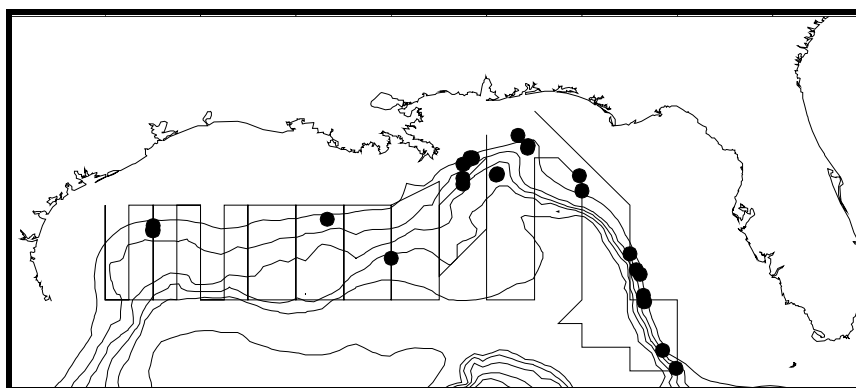


Figure 1. Distribution of spinner dolphin sightings during NOAA Ship Oregon II marine mammal surveys during 1991-1994. The straight lines show transects during two surveys and are examples of typical survey transects. Isobaths are in 183 m (100 fm) intervals.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population size was estimated from the average estimate abundance which was 6,316 spinner dolphins (CV = 0.43) (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 4,465 spinner dolphins.

Current Population Trend

The abundance estimates for 1992 and 1993 were approximately the same and the 1994 estimate was considerably larger; however, the estimates were not significantly different using the criteria of no overlap of log-normal 95% confidence intervals. The apparent differences in abundance estimates may have been caused by less sampling effort during 1991 (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 for this stock 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 45 spinner dolphins.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

The level of past or current, direct, human-caused mortality of spinner dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico is unknown. Available information indicates there likely is little, if any, fisheries interaction with spinner dolphins 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 spinner dolphins 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 dolphins which die or are seriously injured in fishery interactions 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 of spinner dolphins 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 and there are insufficient data to determine population trends. This species is not listed under the Endangered Species Act. The total level of human-caused 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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