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RINGED SEAL (*Phoca hispida*): Alaska Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Ringed seals have a circumpolar distribution from approximately 35°N to the North Pole, occurring in all seas of the Arctic Ocean (King 1983). In the North Pacific, they are found in the southern Bering Sea and range as far south as the Seas of Okhotsk and Japan. Throughout their range, ringed seals have an affinity for ice-covered waters and are well adapted to occupying seasonal and permanent ice. They tend to prefer large floes (i.e., > 48 m in diameter) and are often found in the interior ice pack where the sea ice coverage is greater than 90% (Simpkins et al. 2003). They remain in contact with ice most of the year and pup on the ice in late winter-early spring. Ringed seals are found throughout the Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering Seas, as far south as Bristol Bay in years of extensive ice coverage (Fig. 13). During late April through June, ringed seals are distributed throughout their range from the southern ice edge northward (Burns and Harbo 1972, Burns et al. 1981, Braham et al. 1984). Preliminary results from recent surveys conducted in the Chukchi Sea in May-June 1999 and 2000 indicate that ringed seal density is higher in nearshore fast and pack ice, and lower in offshore pack ice (Bengtson et al. 2005). Results of surveys conducted by Frost and Lowry (1999) indicate that, in the Alaskan Beaufort Sea, the density of ringed seals in May-June is higher to the east than to the west of Flaxman Island. The overall winter distribution is probably similar, and it is believed there is a net movement of seals northward with the ice edge in late spring and summer (Burns 1970). Thus, ringed seals occupying the Bering and southern Chukchi Seas in winter apparently are migratory, but details of their movements are unknown.

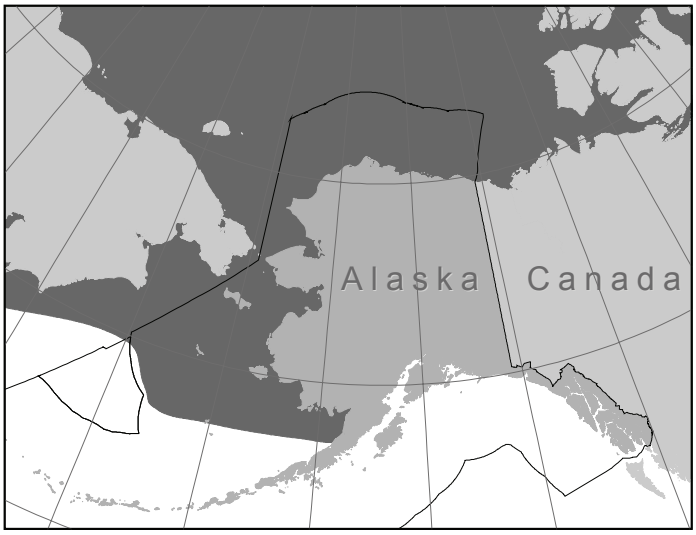

Figure 13. Approximate distribution of ringed seals (shaded area). The combined summer and winter distribution are depicted.

The following information was considered in classifying stock structure based on the Dizon et al. (1992) phylogeographic approach: 1) Distributional data: geographic distribution continuous, 2) Population response data: unknown; 3) Phenotypic data: unknown; 4) Genotypic data: unknown. Based on this limited information, and the absence of any significant fishery interactions, there is currently no strong evidence to suggest splitting ringed seals into more than one stock. Therefore, only the Alaska ringed seal stock is recognized in U.S. waters.

POPULATION SIZE

A reliable abundance estimate for the entire Alaska stock of ringed seals is currently not available. One partial estimate of ringed seal numbers was based on aerial surveys conducted in May-June 1985-1987 in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas from southern Kotzebue Sound north and east to the U.S.-Canada border (Frost et al. 1988). Effort was directed towards shorefast ice within 20 nmi of shore, though some areas of adjacent pack ice were also surveyed. The estimate of the number of hauled out seals in 1987 was 44,360 ± 9,130 (95% CI). During May-June 1999 and 2000 surveys were flown along lines perpendicular to the eastern Chukchi Sea coast from Shishmaref to Barrow (Bengtson et al. 2005). Bengtson et al. (2005) indicate that the estimated abundance of ringed seals for the study area (corrected for seals not hauled out) in 1999 and 2000 was 252,488 (SE = 47,204) and 208,857 (SE = 25,502), respectively. Similar surveys were flown in 1996-1999 in the Alaska Beaufort Sea from Barrow to Kaktovik. Observed seal densities in that region ranged from 0.81 to 1.17/km^2 (Frost et al. 2002, 2004). Moulton et al. (2002) surveyed some of the same area in the central Beaufort Sea during 1997-99, and reported lower seal densities than Frost et al. (2002). Frost et al. (2002) did not produce a population estimate from their 1990s Beaufort Sea surveys. However, the area they surveyed covered approximately 18,000 km^2 (L. Lowry, University of Alaska Fairbanks, pers. comm.), and the average seal density for all years and ice types was 0.98/km^2 (Frost et al. 2002), which indicates that there were approximately 18,000 seals hauled out in the surveyed portion of

the Beaufort Sea. Combining this with the average abundance estimate of 230,673 from Bengtson et al. (2005) for the eastern Chukchi Sea results in a total of approximately 249,000 seals. This is a minimum population estimate because it does not include much of the geographic range of the stock and the estimate for the Alaska Beaufort Sea has not been corrected for the number of ringed seals not hauled out at the time of the surveys. Nonetheless, it provides an update to the estimate from 1987.

Minimum Population Estimate

A reliable minimum population estimate N_{MIN} for this stock can not presently be determined because current reliable estimates of abundance are not available.

Current Population Trend

At present, reliable data on trends in population abundance for the Alaska stock of ringed seals are unavailable.

Frost et al. (2002) reported that trend analysis based on an ANOVA comparison of observed seal densities in the central Beaufort Sea suggested a marginally significant but substantial decline of 31% from 1980-87 to 1996-99. A Poisson regression model indicated highly significant density declines of 72% on fast ice and 43% on pack ice over the 15-year period. However, the apparent decline between the 1980s and the 1990s may have been due to a difference in the timing of surveys rather than an actual decline in abundance.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate is currently unavailable for the Alaska stock of ringed seals. Hence, until additional data become available, it is recommended that the pinniped maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 12% be employed for this stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 reauthorized Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the potential biological removal (PBR) is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock is 0.5, the value for pinniped stocks with unknown population status (Wade and Angliss 1997). However, because a reliable estimate of minimum abundance (N_{MIN}) is currently not available, the PBR for this stock is unknown.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Until 2003, there were three different federally-regulated commercial fisheries in Alaska that could have interacted with ringed seals and were monitored for incidental mortality by fishery observers. As of 2003, changes in fishery definitions in the List of Fisheries have resulted in separating these three fisheries into 12 fisheries (69 FR 70094, 2 December 2004). This change does not represent a change in fishing effort, but provides managers with better information on the component of each fishery that is responsible for the incidental serious injury or mortality of marine mammal stocks in Alaska. Between 2000 and 2004, there were incidental serious injuries and mortalities of ringed seals in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands pollock trawl fishery (Table 17). Estimates of marine mammal serious injury/mortality in each of these observed fisheries are provided in Perez (2006). Based on data from 2000 to 2004, there have been an average of 0.71 mortalities of ringed seals incidental to commercial fishing operations.

Table 17. Summary of incidental mortality of ringed seals (Alaska stock) due to commercial fisheries from 2000 to 2004 and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate. Details of how percent observer coverage is measured is included in Appendix 6.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Observer coverage	Observed mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Bering Sea/Aleutian Is. pollock trawl	2000	obs data	76.2	1	1.4	0.71 (CV = 0.24)
	2001		79.0	2	2.1	
	2002		80.0	0	0	
	2003		82.2	0	0	
	2004		81.2	0	0	

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Observer coverage	Observed mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	Mean annual mortality
Total estimated annual mortality						0.71 (CV = 0.24)

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

Ringed seals are an important species for Alaska Native subsistence hunters. The estimated annual subsistence harvest in Alaska dropped from 7,000 to 15,000 in the period from 1962 to 1972 to an estimated 2,000-3,000 in 1979 (Frost unpubl. report). Based on data from two villages on St. Lawrence Island, the annual take in Alaska during the mid-1980s likely exceeded 3,000 seals (Kelly 1988).

The Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, maintains a database that provides additional information on the subsistence harvest of ice seals in different regions of Alaska (ADFG 2000a, b). Information on subsistence harvest of ringed seals has been compiled for 129 villages from reports from the Division of Subsistence (Coffing et al. 1998, Georgette et al. 1998, Wolfe and Hutchinson-Scarbrough 1999) and a report from the Eskimo Walrus Commission (Sherrod 1982). Data were lacking for 22 villages; their harvests were estimated using the annual per capita rates of subsistence harvest from a nearby village. Harvest levels were estimated from data gathered in the 1980s for 16 villages; otherwise, data gathered from 1990 to 1998 were used. As of August 2000; the subsistence harvest database indicated that the estimated number of ringed seals harvested for subsistence use per year is 9,567.

At this time, there are no efforts to quantify the level of harvest of ringed seals by all Alaska communities. However, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service collects information on the level of ringed seal harvest in five villages during their Walrus Harvest Monitoring Program. Results from this program indicated that an average of 47 ringed seals were harvested annually in Little Diomede, Gambell, Savoonga, Shishmaref, and Wales from 1998 to 2003 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Marine Mammals Management, Walrus Harvest Monitoring Project). Because this represents only 5 of the over 100 villages that may harvest ringed seals, this level of harvest is known to underestimate the actual harvest level for these years.

A report on ice seal subsistence harvest in three Alaskan communities indicated that the number and species of ice seals harvested in a particular village may vary considerably between years (Coffing et al. 1999). These interannual differences are likely due to differences in ice and wind conditions that change the hunters' access to different ice habitats frequented by different types of seals. Regardless of the extent to which the harvest may vary interannually, it is clear that the harvest level of 9,567 ringed seals estimated by the Division of Subsistence is considerably higher than the previous minimum estimate. Although some of the more recent entries in the ADFG database have associated measures of uncertainty (Coffing et al. 1999, Georgette et al. 1998), the overall total does not. The estimate of 9,567 ringed seals is the best estimate currently available.

STATUS OF STOCK

Ringed seals are not listed as "depleted" under the MMPA or listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Reliable estimates of the minimum population, PBR, and human-caused mortality and serious injury are currently not available. Because the PBR for ringed seals is unknown, the level of annual U.S. commercial fishery-related mortality that can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate is unknown. No information is available on the status of ringed seals. Due to a very low level of interactions between U.S. commercial fisheries and ringed seals, the Alaska stock of ringed seals is not considered a strategic stock.

Habitat Concerns

Evidence indicates that the Arctic climate is changing significantly and that one result of the change is a reduction in the extent of sea ice in at least some regions of the Arctic (ACIA 2004, Johannessen et al. 2004). Ringed seals, along with other seals that are dependent on sea ice for at least part of their life history, will be vulnerable to reductions in sea ice. There are insufficient data to make reliable predictions of the effects of Arctic climate change on the Alaska ringed seal stock.

Oil and gas exploration and development overlaps with both the summer and winter ranges of ringed seals in the Alaska Beaufort Sea. NMFS has worked with the oil and gas industry to recommend changes to operations to ensure that mortalities of ringed seals are eliminated or minimized, and to ensure that monitoring occurs to verify that population-level changes in distribution are minor. There has been concern that oil and gas exploration, especially seismic exploration, could result in changes in ringed seal distribution. However, aerial surveys

conducted for 3 years both before and after industry activities indicate that local seal densities in the spring were not significantly different after the advent of industry activity (Moulton et al. 2002). It is not known to what extent this study can be used to determine likely responses of ringed seals to activity in other parts of the species' range.

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