# MELON-HEADED WHALE (Peponocephala electra): Western North Atlantic Stock

# STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The melon-headed whale is distributed worldwide in tropical to sub-tropical waters (Jefferson

et al. 1994) and is assumed to be part of the cetacean fauna of the tropical western North Atlantic. The paucity of sightings is probably due to a naturally low number of groups compared to other cetacean species. Sightings in the more extensively surveyed northern Gulf of Mexico occur in oceanic waters (Mullin et al. 1994; Mullin and Fulling 2004). Sightings of melon-headed whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico were documented in all seasons during GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico between 1992 and 1998 (Hansen et al. 1996; Mullin and Hoggard 2000). The western North Atlantic population is provisionally being considered a separate stock for management purposes, although there is currently no information to differentiate this stock from the northern Gulf of Mexico stock(s). Additional morphological, genetic and/or behavioral data are needed to provide further information on stock delineation.

### POPULATION SIZE

The numbers of melon-headed whales off the U.S. or Canadian Atlantic coast are unknown, and seasonal abundance estimates are not available for this stock, since it was rarely seen in any surveys. A group of melon- headed whales was sighted during both a 1999 (20 whales) and 2002 (80 whales) vessel survey of the western North Atlantic off of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina in waters >2500 m deep (Figure 1; NMFS 1999, 2002).

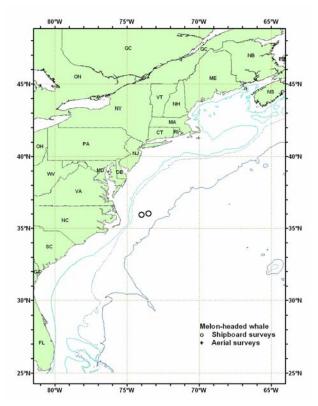


Figure 1. Distribution of melon-headed whales from SEFSC vessel surveys during 1998-2002. All sightings are shown. Solid lines indicate the 100 m, 1,000 m, and 4,000 m isobaths.

Abundances have not been estimated from the 1999 and 2002 vessel surveys in western North Atlantic because the sighting was not made during line-transect sampling effort; therefore the population size of melon-headed whales is unknown. No melon-headed whales have been observed in any other surveys.

# **Minimum Population Estimate**

Present data are insufficient to calculate a minimum population estimate for this stock.

# **Current Population Trend**

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock.

# **CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES**

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. For purposes of this assessment, 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 history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

# POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal level (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate, and a recovery factor (MMPA Sec. 3.16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is unknown. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The "recovery" factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, 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 western North Atlantic stock of melon-headed whales is unknown because the minimum population size is unknown.

# ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY Fishery Information

Detailed fishery information is reported in Appendix III. Total annual estimated average fishery-related mortality and serious injury to this stock during 2001-2005 was zero, as there were no reports of mortality or serious injury to melon-headed whales.

# **Other Mortality**

From 2001-2005, 1 melon-headed whale stranded in New Jersey and one in Georgia in 2004. Prior to this time, 1 melon-headed whale was reported stranded in Puerto Rico in 1999. No evidence of human interaction was apparent for any of the stranded animals.

Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because all of the marine mammals that die or are seriously injured may not 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 or human interaction.

## STATUS OF STOCK

The status of melon-headed whales, relative to OSP, in the western North Atlantic EEZ is unknown. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. There are insufficient data to determine the population size or trends and PBR cannot be calculated for this stock. No fishery-related mortality and serious injury has been observed since 1999; therefore, total U.S. fishery-related mortality and serious injury rate can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury. This is not a strategic stock.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Barlow, J., S. L. Swartz, T. C. Eagle, and P. R. Wade. 1995. U.S. Marine mammal stock assessments: Guidelines for preparation, background, and a summary of the 1995 assessments. U.S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-OPR-6, 73pp. Available from NMFS, Southwest Fisheries Science Center, 8604 La Jolla Shores Drive, La Jolla, CA, 92037-1508.
- Hansen, L. J., K. D. Mullin, T. A. Jefferson, and G. P. Scott. 1996. Visual surveys aboard ships and aircraft. Pages 55-132. *In:* R. W. Davis and G. S. Fargion (editors), Distribution and abundance of marine mammals in the north-central and western Gulf of Mexico: Final report. Volume II: Technical report. OCS Study MMS 96- 0027. Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, New Orleans.
- Jefferson, T. A., S. Leatherwood, and M. A. Weber. 1994. Marine mammals of the world. FAO, Rome, 320 pp.
- Mullin, K.D., T.A. Jefferson, L.J. Hansen, and W. Hoggard. 1994. First sightings of melon-headed whales (*Peponocephala electra*) in the Gulf of Mexico. Mar. Mam. Sci. 10(3): 342-348.
- Mullin, K. D. and W. Hoggard. 2000. Visual surveys of cetaceans and sea turtles from aircraft and ships. Pages 111- 172. *In:* R. W. Davis, W. E. Evans, and B. Würsig (editors), Cetaceans, sea turtles and seabirds in the northern Gulf of Mexico: Distribution, abundance and habitat associations. Volume II: Technical report. OCS Study MMS 96-0027. Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico

- OCS Region, New Orleans.
- Mullin, K. D. and G. L. Fulling. 2004. Abundance of cetaceans in the oceanic northern Gulf of Mexico, 1996-2001. Mar. Mamm. Sci. 20(4):787-807.
- NMFS [National Marine Fisheries Service]. 1999. Cruise results. Summer Atlantic Ocean marine mammal survey. NOAA Ship *Oregon II* cruise 236 (99-05), 4 August 30 September 1999. Available from SEFSC, 3209 Frederic Street, Pascagoula, MS 39567.
- NMFS [National Marine Fisheries Service]. 2002. Cruise results. Mid-Atlantic cetacean survey. NOAA Ship *Gordon Gunter* cruise GU-02-01, 6 February 8 April 2002. Available from SEFSC, 3209 Frederic Street, Pascagoula, MS 39567.
- Wade, P.R., and R.P. Angliss. 1997. Guidelines for assessing marine mammal stocks: Report of the GAMMS Workshop April 3-5, 1996, Seattle, Washington. U.S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-OPR-12, 93 pp.