

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 1994). 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and over the deeper waters off the continental shelf (Mullin et al. 1991; Southeast Fisheries Science Center, SEFSC, unpublished data).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* spp. 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.

POPULATION SIZE

Estimates of abundance of *Kogia* spp. 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 *Kogia* spp. 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* spp. 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.

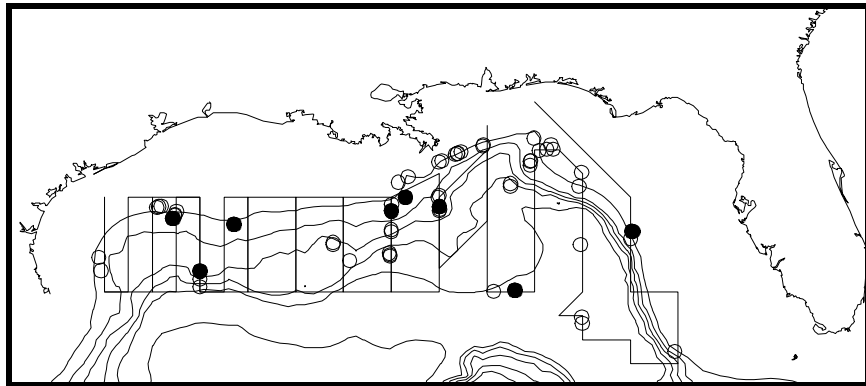


Figure 1. Distribution of all *Kogia* sightings (unfilled circles) and sightings identified as pygmy sperm whales (filled circles) during NOAA Ship Oregon II marine mammal surveys in 1991-1994. The straight lines show transects during two surveys and are examples of typical survey transects. Isobaths are in 183 m (100 fm) intervals.

Minimum Population Estimate

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

Current Population Trend

A declining trend is evident in the annual abundance estimates since 1992; however, the 1991, 1993 and 1994 abundance 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 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.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal level (PBR) was not calculated because the minimum population size cannot be calculated.

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 1987-1994 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.

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. 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 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 13 pygmy sperm whale strandings were documented in the northern Gulf of Mexico from 1987-present; one of these animals had a plastic bag in its stomach and another 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. The total level of fishery-related mortality and serious injury is unknown, but it is believed to be insignificant. Upon the advice of the Atlantic Scientific Review Group this stock has been designated a strategic stock because PBR cannot be determined and there is an unknown amount of possible human-caused mortality from the ingestion of marine debris such as plastic bags and possibly from collision with vessels.

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