

KILLER WHALE (*Orcinus orca*): Eastern North Pacific Transient Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Killer whales have been observed in all oceans and seas of the world (Leatherwood and Dahlheim 1978). Although reported from tropical and offshore waters, killer whales prefer the colder waters of both hemispheres, with greatest abundances found within 800 km of major continents (Mitchell 1975). Along the west coast of North America, killer whales occur along the entire Alaskan coast (Braham and Dahlheim 1982), in British Columbia and Washington inland waterways (Bigg et al. 1990), and along the outer coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California (Green et al. 1992; Barlow 1995, 1997; Forney et al. 1995). Seasonal and year-round occurrence has been noted for killer whales throughout Alaska (Braham and Dahlheim 1982) and in the intracoastal waterways of British Columbia and Washington State, where pods have been labeled as 'resident,' 'transient,' and 'offshore' (Bigg et al. 1990, Ford et al. 1994) based on aspects of morphology, ecology, genetics, and behavior (Ford and Fisher 1982, Baird and Stacey 1988, Baird et al. 1992, Hoelzel et al. 1998). Through examination of photographs of recognizable individuals and pods, movements of whales between geographical areas have been documented. For example, whales identified in Prince William Sound have been observed near Kodiak Island (Heise et al. 1991) and whales identified in Southeast Alaska have been observed in Prince William Sound, British Columbia, and Puget Sound (Leatherwood et al. 1990, Dahlheim et al. 1997). Movements of killer whales between the waters of Southeast Alaska and central California have also been documented (Goley and Straley 1994).

Studies on mtDNA restriction patterns provide evidence that the 'resident' and 'transient' types are genetically distinct (Stevens et al. 1989, Hoelzel 1991, Hoelzel and Dover 1991, Hoelzel et al. 1998). Analysis of 73 samples collected from eastern North Pacific killer whales from California to Alaska has demonstrated significant genetic differences among 'transient' whales from California through Alaska, 'resident' whales from the inland waters of Washington, and 'resident' whales ranging from British Columbia to the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea (Hoelzel et al. 1998).

Based on data regarding association patterns, acoustics, movements, genetic differences and potential fishery interactions, five killer whale stocks are recognized within the Pacific U.S. EEZ: 1) the Eastern North Pacific Northern Resident stock - occurring from British Columbia through Alaska, 2) the Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident stock - occurring within the inland waters of Washington State and southern British Columbia, 3) the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock - occurring from Alaska through California (see Fig. 1), 4) the Eastern North Pacific Offshore stock - occurring from Southeast Alaska through California, and 5) the Hawaiian stock. 'Transient' whales in Canadian waters are considered part of the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock. The Stock Assessment Reports for the Alaska Region contain information concerning the Eastern North Pacific Northern Resident stock

POPULATION SIZE

The Eastern North Pacific Northern Transient stock is a trans-boundary stock, including killer whales from British Columbia. Preliminary analysis of photographic data resulted in the following minimum counts for 'transient' killer whales belonging to the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock (Note: individual whales have been matched between geographical regions and missing animals likely to be dead have been subtracted). In British Columbia and southeastern Alaska, 213 'transient' whales have been cataloged (Ford and Ellis 1999). In the Gulf of Alaska, 17 'transient' killer

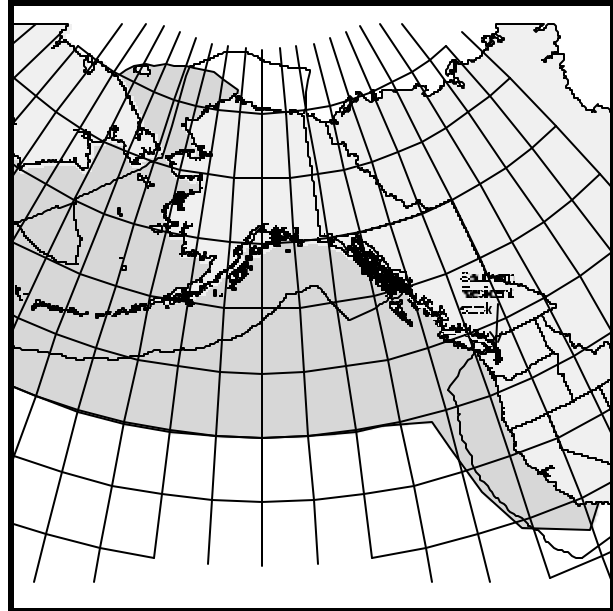


Figure 1. Approximate distribution of killer whales in the eastern North Pacific (shaded area). The distribution of the Eastern North Pacific Northern Resident and Transient stocks are largely overlapping (see text).

whales have been identified genetically and acoustically (L. Barrett-Lennard, pers. comm.). The 'transient' group AT1, commonly seen in Prince William Sound, was thought to have 11 whales alive in 1997 (Matkin et al. 1998). Based on data collected from all Alaska waters west of Seward (Dahlheim and Waite 1993, Dahlheim 1994, 1997), 68 whales are considered 'residents' as they have been linked by association to 'resident' whales from Prince William Sound (G. Ellis, pers. comm.), and the remainder are provisionally classified as 174 'residents' and 53 'transients.' Provisional classifications were based primarily on morphological differences identified from the photographs. Accordingly, the numbers of 'residents' and 'transients' in Alaska waters west of Seward are considered preliminary at this time. Off the coast of California, Black et al. (1997) identified 105 'transient' whales: 10 whales were matched to photos of 'transients' in other catalogs and the remaining 95 were linked by association. Combining the counts of 'transient' whales gives a minimum number of 336 (213 + 17 + 11 + 95) killer whales belonging to the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock.

Minimum Population Estimate

The survey technique utilized for obtaining the abundance estimate of killer whales is a direct count of individually identifiable animals. Given that researchers continue to identify new whales, the estimate of abundance based on the number of uniquely identified individuals known to be alive is likely conservative. However, the rate of discovering new whales within Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound is relatively low. In addition, the abundance estimate does not include 53 unclassified whales from western Alaska that have been provisionally classified as 'transients'.

Other estimates of the overall population size (i.e., N_{BEST}) and associated $CV(N)$ are not currently available. Thus, the minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) for the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock of killer whales is 336 animals, which includes animals found in Canadian waters (see PBR Guidelines regarding the status of migratory trans-boundary stocks, Wade and Angliss 1997). Information on the percentage of time animals typically encountered in Canadian waters spend in U.S. waters is unknown. However, as noted above, this minimum population estimate is considered conservative. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (DeMaster 1996).

Current Population Trend

At present, reliable data on trends in population abundance for the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock of killer whales are unavailable.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate is currently unavailable for this stock of killer whales. Studies of 'resident' killer whale pods in the Pacific Northwest resulted in estimated population growth rates of 2.92% and 2.54% over the period from 1973 to 1987 (Olesiuk et al. 1990, Brault and Caswell 1993). However, a population increases at the maximum growth rate (R_{MAX}) only when the population is at extremely low levels; thus, the estimate of 2.92% is not a reliable estimate of R_{MAX} . Hence, until additional data become available, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be employed for this stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 re-authorized 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 0.45, the value for cetacean stocks with unknown population status and a mortality estimate CV between 0.6 and 0.8 (Wade and Angliss 1997). Thus, for the Eastern North Pacific Transient killer whale stock, $PBR = 3.0$ animals ($336 \times 0.02 \times 0.45$). The proportion of time that this trans-boundary stock spends in Canadian waters cannot be determined (G. Ellis, pers. comm.).

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

Six different commercial fisheries in Alaska that could have interacted with killer whales were monitored for incidental take by fishery observers from 1993 to 1997: Bering Sea (and Aleutian Islands) and Gulf of Alaska groundfish trawl, longline, and pot fisheries. Of the six observed fisheries, killer whale mortalities occurred only in the Bering Sea groundfish trawl and longline fisheries. For the fisheries with observed takes, the range of observer coverage over the 5-year period, as well as the annual observed and estimated mortalities, are presented in Table 1. The 1995 mortality in

the longline fishery occurred during an unmonitored haul and could not be used to estimate total mortality for the fishery (28% observer coverage in 1995). For computational purposes, the estimated mortality in 1995 was set at 1, because at a minimum, one whale is known to have perished in that year. The 1993 mortality in the trawl fishery occurred under similar circumstances and was treated in the same manner (66% observer coverage in 1993).

NMFS observers also monitored the California/Oregon thresher shark/swordfish drift gillnet fishery from 1993 to 1997 (Table 1; Julian 1997, Cameron 1998, Julian and Beeson 1998). The observed mortality in this fishery, in 1995, was a transient whale as determined by genetic testing (S. Chivers, pers. comm.). Additional fisheries that could interact with the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock of killer whales are listed in Appendix 1 of Barlow et al. (1997).

The mean annual mortality was 0.6 (CV=0.67) for the Bering Sea groundfish trawl fishery, 0.2 (CV=1.0) for the combined Bering Sea longline fishery, and 1.2 (CV=1.0) for the California/Oregon thresher shark/swordfish drift gillnet fishery, resulting in a mean annual mortality rate of 2.0 (CV=0.64) killer whales per year from observed fisheries.

An additional source of information on the number of killer whales killed or injured incidental to commercial fishery operations is the self-reported fisheries information required of vessel operators by the MMPA. During the period between 1990 and 1997, fisher self-reports from all Alaska fisheries operating within the range of this stock indicated only one killer whale mortality, which occurred in the Bering Sea groundfish trawl fishery in 1990. However, because logbook records (fisher self-reports required during 1990-94) are most likely negatively biased (Credle et al. 1994), these are considered to be minimum estimates. Self-reported fisheries data are incomplete for 1994, not available for 1995, and considered unreliable after 1995 (see Appendix 4 of Hill and DeMaster 1998). Thus, the observer program provides more reliable estimates of mortality than the fisher self-reports.

The estimated minimum mortality rate incidental to U.S. commercial fisheries recently monitored is 2.0 animals per year, based exclusively on observer data. As the animals which were taken incidental to commercial fisheries in Alaska have not been identified genetically, it is not possible to determine whether they belonged to the Eastern North Pacific Northern Resident or the Eastern North Pacific Transient killer whale stock. Accordingly, these same mortalities can be found in the stock assessment report for the Northern Resident stock.

Table 1. Summary of incidental mortality of killer whales (Eastern North Pacific Northern Transient stock) due to commercial fisheries from 1993 through 1997 and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate. Only data from 1993 to 1997 (or the most recent 5 years of available data) are used to calculate mean annual mortality.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Range of observer coverage	Observed mortality (in given yrs.)	Estimated mortality (in given yrs.)	1993-97 Mean annual mortality
Bering Sea/Aleutian Is. (BSAI) groundfish trawl	93-97	obs data	64-67%	1, 0, 0, 0, 1	1, 0, 0, 0, 2	0.6 (CV=0.67)
BSAI groundfish longline (incl. misc. finfish and sablefish fisheries)	93-97	obs data	27-33%	0, 0, 1, 0, 0	0, 0, 1, 0, 0	0.2 (CV=1.0)
CA/OR thresher shark/swordfish drift gillnet	93-97	obs data	12-27%	0, 0, 1, 0, 0	0, 0, 6, 0, 0	1.2 (CV=1.0)
Estimated total annual mortality						2.0 (CV=0.64)

Due to a lack of Canadian observer programs, there are few data concerning the mortality of marine mammals incidental to Canadian commercial fisheries, which are analogous to U.S. fisheries that are known to interact with killer whales. The sablefish longline fishery accounts for a large proportion of the commercial fishing/killer whale interactions in Alaska waters. Such interactions have not been reported in Canadian waters where sablefish are taken via a pot fishery. Since 1990, there have been no reported fishery-related strandings of killer whales in Canadian waters. However, in 1994, one killer whale was reported to have contacted a salmon gillnet but did not entangle (Guenther et al. 1995). Data regarding the level of killer whale mortality related to commercial fisheries in Canadian waters, though thought to be small, are not readily available or reliable which results in an underestimate of the annual mortality for this stock.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

There are no reports of a subsistence harvest of killer whales in Alaska or Canada.

Other Mortality

Since 1986, research efforts have been made to assess the nature and magnitude of killer whale/blackcod (sablefish; *Anoplopoma fimbria*) fishery interactions (Yano and Dahlheim 1995, Dahlheim 1988). Fishery interactions have occurred each year in the Bering Sea and Prince William Sound, with the number of annual reports varying considerably. Data collected from the Japan/U.S. cooperative longline research surveys operating in the Bering Sea indicate that interactions may be increasing and expanding into the Aleutian Island region (Yano and Dahlheim 1995). During the 1992 surveys conducted in the Bering Sea and western Gulf of Alaska, 9 of 182 (4.9%) individual whales in 7 of the 12 (58%) pods encountered had evidence of bullet wounds (Dahlheim and Waite 1993). The relationship between wounding due to shooting and survival is unknown. In Prince William Sound, the pod responsible for most of the fishery interactions has experienced a high level of mortality: between 1986 and 1991, 22 whales out of a pod of 37 (59%) are missing and considered dead (Matkin et al. 1994). The cause of death for these whales is unknown, but may be related to gunshot wounds or effects of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill (Dahlheim and Matkin 1994).

The shooting of killer whales in Canadian waters has also been a concern in the past. However, in recent years there have been no reports of shooting incidents in Canadian waters. In fact, the likelihood of shooting incidents involving 'transient' killer whales is thought to be minimal since commercial fishermen are most likely to observe 'transients' feeding on seals or sea lions instead of interacting with their fishing gear (G. Ellis, pers. comm.).

Other Issues

Although only small numbers of killer whales are taken in the Bering Sea fisheries, there is considerable interaction between the whales and the fisheries. Interactions between killer whales and longline vessels have been well documented (Dahlheim 1988, Yano and Dahlheim 1995). In 1997, the first year that predation data were collected in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska groundfish trawl, longline and pot fisheries, NMFS observers recorded killer whale predation and/or deterrence events during 187 longline sets: 179 in the Bering Sea and 8 in the Gulf of Alaska. A total of 183 whales were deterred (through the use of seal bombs or acoustic alarms suspended from the vessels) from 20 sets in the Bering Sea and one group of 35 whales was deterred from a set in the Gulf of Alaska. Less has been documented regarding interactions with the trawl fishery, but several observers reported that large groups of killer whales in the Bering Sea followed vessels for days at a time, actively consuming the processing waste (Fishery Observer Program, unpubl. data). However, it may be the 'resident' stock of killer whales that is involved in such fisheries interactions since these whales are known to be fish eaters, while 'transient' whales have only been observed feeding on marine mammals.

STATUS OF STOCK

Killer whales are not listed as "depleted" under the MMPA or listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Recall, that the human-caused mortality has been underestimated primarily due to a lack of information on Canadian fisheries, and that the minimum abundance estimate is considered conservative (because researchers continue to encounter new whales and unclassified whales from western Alaska were not included), resulting in a conservative PBR estimate. Based on currently available data, the estimated annual fishery-related mortality level (2.0) exceeds 10% of the PBR (0.30) and, therefore, can not be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. The estimated annual level of human-caused mortality and serious injury (2.0 animals per year) is not known to exceed the PBR (3.0). Therefore, the Eastern North Pacific Transient stock of killer whales is not classified as a strategic stock. Population trends and status of this stock relative to its Optimum Sustainable Population are currently unknown.

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