

ATLANTIC SPOTTED DOLPHIN (*Stenella frontalis*): Western North Atlantic Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

There are two species of spotted dolphin in the Western Atlantic — the Atlantic spotted dolphin, *Stenella frontalis*, formerly *S. plagiodon* (Perrin *et al.* 1987), and the pantropical spotted dolphin, *S. attenuata*. These species are difficult to differentiate at sea.

Atlantic spotted dolphins are distributed in tropical and warm temperate waters of the western North Atlantic (Leatherwood *et al.* 1976). Their distribution is from southern New England, south through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean to Venezuela (Leatherwood *et al.* 1976; Perrin *et al.* 1987). The large, heavily spotted form of the Atlantic spotted dolphin along the southeastern and Gulf coasts of the United States inhabits the continental shelf, usually being found inside or near the 200 m isobath (within 250-350 km of the coast) but sometimes coming into very shallow water adjacent to the beach. Off the northeast U.S. coast, spotted dolphins are widely distributed on the continental shelf, along the continental shelf edge, and offshore over the deep ocean south of 40° N (CeTAP 1982). Atlantic spotted dolphins regularly occur in the inshore waters south of Chesapeake Bay and near the continental shelf edge and continental slope waters north of this region (Payne *et al.* 1984). Sightings have also been made along the north wall of the Gulf Stream and warm-core ring features (Waring *et al.* 1992). Stock structure in the western North Atlantic is unknown.

POPULATION SIZE

The total number of Atlantic spotted dolphins off the eastern U.S. coast is unknown. However, two population sizes are available for select regions from spring and summer 1978-82 and July-September 1995 (Table 1; Figure 1). Because *S. frontalis* and *S. attenuata* are difficult to differentiate at sea, the reported abundance estimates are for both species of spotted dolphins.

A population size of 6,107 (CV=0.27) was estimated from an aerial survey program conducted from 1978 to 1982 on the continental shelf and shelf edge waters between Cape Hatteras, North Carolina and Nova Scotia (Table 1; CeTAP 1982). R. Kenney (pers. comm.) provided abundance estimates for both species of spotted dolphins combined that accounted for survey effort in two continental slope survey blocks and uncertainties resulting from sightings of unidentified small dolphins. The estimate is based on an inverse variance weighted pooling of spring and summer data. An average of these seasons were chosen because the greatest proportion of the population off the northeast U.S. coast appeared in the study area during these seasons. This estimate does not include a correction for dive-time or $g(0)$, the probability of detecting an animal group on the track line. Furthermore, this survey did not cover important spotted dolphin habitat in the continental shelf between Cape Hatteras and Florida, and Atlantic deep oceanic waters. This estimate may not reflect the current true population size because of its high degree of uncertainty, its old age, and it was estimated just after cessation of extensive foreign fishing operations in the region.

A population size of undifferentiated 4,772 (CV=1.27) spotted dolphins was estimated from a July to September 1995 sighting survey conducted by two ships and an airplane that covered waters from Virginia to the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Table 1; Palka and Waring, in prep.). Total track line length was 32,600 km (17,600 nmi). The ships

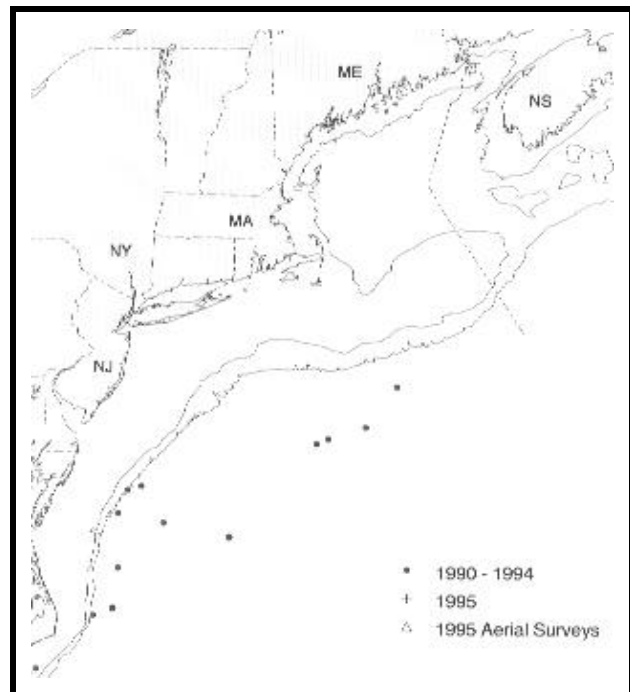


Figure 1. Distribution of spotted dolphin sightings from NEFSC shipboard and aerial surveys during the summer in 1990-1995. Isobaths are at 100 m and 1,000 m.

covered waters between the 50 and 1000 fathom contour lines, the northern edge of the Gulf Stream, and the northern Gulf of Maine/Bay of Fundy region. The airplane covered waters in the Mid-Atlantic from the coastline to the 50 fathom contour line, the southern Gulf of Maine, and shelf waters off Nova Scotia from the coastline to the 1000 fathom contour line. Shipboard data were collected using a two independent sighting team procedure and were analyzed using the product integral method (Palka 1995) and DISTANCE (Buckland *et al.* 1993). Shipboard estimates were corrected for $g(0)$ and, if applicable, also for school size-bias. Standard aerial sighting procedures with two bubble windows and one belly window observer were used during the aerial survey. An estimate of $g(0)$ was not made for the aerial portion of the survey. Estimates do not include corrections for dive-time. Variability was estimated using bootstrap resampling techniques.

The best available current abundance estimate for the undifferentiated group of spotted dolphins is 4,772 (CV=1.27) as estimated from the July to September 1995 line transect survey (Palka and Waring, in prep.) because this survey is recent and provided the most complete coverage of the known habitat.

Table 1. Summary of abundance estimates for a combination of the Atlantic and pantropical spotted dolphin. Month, year, and area covered during each abundance survey, and resulting abundance estimate (N_{best}) and coefficient of variation (CV).

Month/Year	Area	N_{best}	CV
spring & summer 1978-82	Cape Hatteras, NC to Nova Scotia	6,107	0.27
Jul-Sep 1995	Virginia to Gulf of St. Lawrence	4,772	1.27

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normally distributed best abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distribution as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for the undifferentiated group of spotted dolphins is 4,772 (CV=1.27). The minimum population estimate for the undifferentiated group of spotted dolphins is 1,617 (CV=1.27).

Current Population Trend

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

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 life history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal (PBR) is the product of minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate, and a “recovery” factor (Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size for the undifferentiated group of spotted dolphins is 1,617 (CV=1.27). 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 set to 0.5 because this stock is of unknown status. PBR for the undifferentiated group of spotted dolphins combined is 16. It is not possible to calculate a PBR for the Atlantic spotted dolphin (*S. frontalis*) stock alone because it was impossible to separately identify the two species.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

No spotted dolphin mortalities were observed in 1977-1991 foreign fishing activities. Forty-eight mortalities have been documented between 1989 and 1995 in the pelagic drift gillnet fishery. Six whole animal carcasses that were sent to the Smithsonian were identified as Pantropical spotted dolphins (*Stenella attenuata*). The remaining animals were not identified to species. No mortalities were documented in the pelagic pair trawl, New England multispecies sink gillnet, mid-Atlantic coastal gillnet, and North Atlantic bottom trawl fisheries; and no takes have been documented in a review of Canadian gillnet and trap fisheries (Read 1994).

The 1991-1995 total average estimated annual fishery-related mortality of spotted dolphins in the U.S. EEZ was 21.7 (CV=0.12) (Table 2). The 1991-1995 period provides a better characterization of the pelagic drift gillnet fishery (i.e., fewer vessels and increased observer coverage).

Fisheries Information

Data on current incidental takes in U.S. fisheries are available from several sources. In 1986, NMFS established a mandatory self-reported fisheries information system for large pelagic fisheries. Data files are maintained at the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC). The Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) Sea Sampling Observer Program was initiated in 1989 and since that year several fisheries have been covered by the program. In late 1992 and in 1993, the SEFSC provided observer coverage of pelagic longline vessels fishing off the Grand Banks (Tail of the Banks) and provides observer coverage of vessels fishing south of Cape Hatteras. Total fishery-related mortality and serious injury cannot be estimated separately for the two species of spotted dolphins in the U.S. Atlantic Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) because of the uncertainty in species identification by fishery observers. The Atlantic Scientific Review Group advised adopting the risk-averse strategy of assuming that either species might have been subject to the observed fishery-related mortality and serious injury.

By-catch has been observed by NMFS Sea Samplers in the pelagic drift gillnet and pelagic longline fisheries, but no mortalities or serious injuries have been documented in the pelagic pair trawl, mid-Atlantic coastal sink gillnet, and North Atlantic bottom trawl fisheries.

The estimated total number of hauls in the pelagic drift gillnet fishery increased from 714 in 1989 to 1,144 in 1990; thereafter, with the introduction of quotas, effort was severely reduced. The estimated number of hauls in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995 were 233, 243, 232, 197 and 164, respectively. Fifty-nine different vessels participated in this fishery at one time or another between 1989 and 1993. Observer coverage, expressed as percent of sets observed, was 8% in 1989, 6% in 1990, 20% in 1991, 40% in 1992, 42% in 1993, 87% in 1994 and 99% in 1995. Effort was concentrated along the southern edge of Georges Bank and off Cape Hatteras. Examination of the species composition of the catch and locations of the fishery throughout the year, suggested that the pelagic drift gillnet fishery be stratified into two strata, a southern or winter stratum, and a northern or summer stratum. Estimates of the total by-catch, from 1989 to 1993, were obtained using the aggregated (pooled 1989-1993) catch rates, by strata (Northridge 1996). Estimates of total annual by-catch for 1994 and 1995 were estimated from the sum of the observed caught and the product of the average bycatch per haul and the number of unobserved hauls as recorded in self-reported fisheries information. Variances were estimated using bootstrap re-sampling techniques (Bisack, in prep.). Forty-seven spotted dolphin mortalities were observed in the drift gillnet fishery between 1989 and 1995 and occurred northeast of Cape Hatteras within the 183 m isobath in February-April, and near Lydonia Canyon in October. Estimated annual mortality and serious injury attributable to this fishery (CV in parentheses) was 25 in 1989 (.65), 51 in 1990 (.49), 11 in 1991 (.41), 20 in 1992 (0.18), 8.4 in 1993 (0.40), 29 in 1994 (0.01), and 0 in 1995; average annual mortality and serious injury during 1991-1995 was 13.7 (0.10) (Table 2).

Interactions between the pelagic longline fishery and spotted dolphins have been reported; however, a vessel may fish in more than one statistical reporting area and it is not possible to separate estimates of fishing effort other than to subtract Gulf of Mexico effort from Atlantic fishing effort, which includes the Caribbean Sea. This fishery has been monitored with about 5% observer coverage, in terms of trips observed, since 1992. Total effort for the pelagic longline fishery (Atlantic, including the Caribbean), based on mandatory self-reported fisheries information, was 11,279 sets in 1991, 10,605 sets in 1992, and 11,538 in 1993 (Cramer 1994). Estimated take was based on a generalized linear model (Poisson error assumption) fit to the available observed incidental take and self-reported incidental take and effort data for the fishery (SEFSC unpublished data). Annual estimates of mortality and serious injury were based on observed takes across the entire pelagic longline fishery (including the Gulf of Mexico). All observed takes were used because the species occurs throughout the area of the fishery, but observed takes were infrequent in any given region of the fishery. There was no mortality or serious injury reported in 1992 and estimated fishery-related mortality and serious injury to spotted

dolphins (both species) in the pelagic longline fishery in 1993 was 16 (CV = 0.19); average annual mortality and serious injury attributable to this fishery in 1992-1993 was 8.0 spotted dolphins (CV = 0.27) (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of the incidental mortality of spotted dolphins (*Stenella frontalis*) by commercial fishery including the years sampled (Years), the number of vessels active within the fishery (Vessels), the type of data used (Data Type), the annual observer coverage (Observer Coverage), the mortalities recorded by on-board observers (Observed Mortality), the estimated annual mortality (Estimated Mortality), the estimated CV of the annual mortality (Estimated CVs) and the mean annual mortality (CV in parentheses).

Fishery	Years	Vessels	Data Type ¹	Observer Coverage ²	Observed Mortality	Estimated Mortality	Estimated CVs	Mean Annual Mortality
Pelagic Drift Gillnet	91-95	1994=11 ³ 1995=12	Obs. Data Logbook	.20, .40, .42, .87, .99	0, 12, 0, 29, 0	11 ⁴ , 20, 8.4, 29, 0	.41, .18, .40, .01, 0	13.7 (.10)
Longline ⁵	92-93		Obs. Data Logbook	.05		0, 16	0, .19	8 (.27)
TOTAL								21.7 (.12)

¹ Observer data (Obs. Data) are used to measure bycatch rates, and the data are collected within the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) Sea Sampling Program. Mandatory logbook (Logbook) data are used to measure total effort for the pelagic drift gillnet fishery, and these data are collected at the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC).

² The observer coverage for the pelagic drift gillnet and pair trawl fishery is measured in terms of sets, and the longline fishery is in trips.

³ 1994 and 1995 shown, other years not available on an annual basis.

⁴ For 1991-1993, pooled bycatch rates were used to estimate bycatch in months that had fishing effort but did not have observer coverage. This method is described in Northridge (1996). In 1994 and 1995, observer coverage increased substantially, and bycatch rates were not pooled for this period (Bisack, in prep).

⁵ Assessments for 1994 and 1995 are not completed but are expected to be in the marine mammal stock assessment report next year.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of Atlantic spotted dolphins, relative to OSP in the U.S. Atlantic EEZ is unknown. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. In Canada, the Cetacean Protection Regulations of 1982, promulgated under the Standing Fisheries Act, prohibit the catching or harassment of all cetacean species. There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this species. Total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is not less than 10% of the calculated PBR and, therefore, cannot be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. This is a strategic stock because the average annual fishery-related mortality and serious injury of spotted dolphins would exceed PBR for this stock (if it could be calculated) even if the minimum population estimate for spotted dolphins were exclusively *S. frontalis*.

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