

KILLER WHALE (*Orcinus orca*): AT1 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 occur at higher densities in colder and more productive waters of both hemispheres, with the greatest densities found at high latitudes (Mitchell 1975, Leatherwood and Dahlheim 1978, and Forney and Wade 2006). Killer whales are found throughout the North Pacific. Along the west coast of North America, killer whales occur along the entire Alaskan coast (Braham and Dahlheim 1982, Dahlheim et al. 2009), 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; Dahlheim et al. 2009) 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. 2000) 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, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000; Dahlheim et al. 2008). 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 (Matkin et al. 1999) 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; Black et al. 1997; Dahlheim and White 2010).

Several studies provide evidence that the ‘resident,’ ‘offshore,’ and ‘transient’ ecotypes are genetically distinct in both mtDNA and nuclear DNA (Hoelzel and Dover 1991; Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000, Morin et al. 2010). Genetic differences have also been found between populations within the ‘transient’ and ‘resident’ ecotypes (Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000).

The first studies of transient killer whales in Alaska were conducted in Southeast Alaska and in the Gulf of Alaska (from Prince William Sound, through the Kenai Fjords, and around Kodiak Island). In the Gulf of Alaska, Matkin et al. (1999) described two genetically distinct communities of transients which were never found in association with one another, the so-called ‘Gulf of Alaska’ transients and ‘AT1’ transients. Neither of these communities regularly associates with transient killer whales that range from California to Southeast Alaska, which has been termed the ‘west coast’ community. ‘Gulf of Alaska’ transients are seen throughout the Gulf of Alaska, including occasional sightings in Prince William Sound, and are seen rarely in Southeast Alaska and British Columbia. AT1 transients have only been observed in Prince William Sound and in the Kenai Fjords region, and are therefore partially sympatric with ‘Gulf of Alaska’ transients. Transients within the ‘Gulf of Alaska’ community have been found to have two mtDNA haplotypes, neither of which is found in the west coast or AT1 communities. Members of the AT1 community share a single mtDNA haplotype. Transient killer whales from the ‘west coast’ community have been found to share a single mtDNA haplotype that is not found in the other communities. Additionally, all three communities have been found to have significant differences in nuclear (microsatellite) DNA (Barrett-Lennard 2000). Acoustic differences have been found, as well; Saulitis et al. (2005) described acoustic

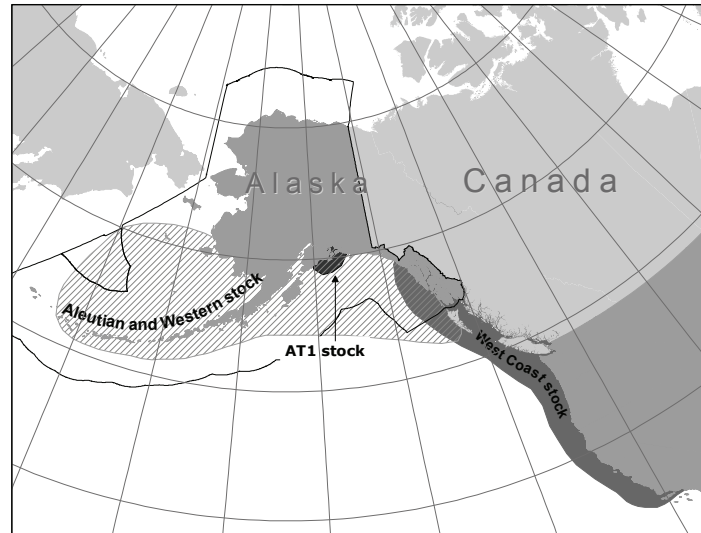


Figure 24. Approximate distribution of killer whales in the eastern North Pacific (shaded area). The distribution of the eastern North Pacific Resident and Transient stocks are largely overlapping (see text).

differences between ‘Gulf of Alaska’ transients and AT1 transients. For these reasons, the ‘Gulf of Alaska’ transients are considered part of a population that is discrete from the AT1 population, and both of these communities are considered discrete from the ‘west coast’ transients.

Recent research in western Alaska, particularly along the south side of the Alaska Peninsula and in the eastern Aleutian Islands, have identified transient killer whales with mtDNA haplotypes identical with the Gulf of Alaska transients (Zerbini et al. 2007, Matkin et al. 2007), however their connection with Gulf of Alaska transients is equivocal considering there has been little documented interchange between these areas and nuclear DNA analysis has not been completed. AT1 haplotypes are also found in western Alaska, but nuclear DNA assignment tests indicate these whales are part of an Aleutian Islands population rather than part of the AT1 population (Wade 2004). Samples from the central Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea have also identified mtDNA haplotypes not found in Gulf of Alaska transients, suggesting the possibility there is at least one additional population in western Alaska (P. Wade, AFSC-NMML, pers comm.). At this point, analyses have not been completed to resolve transient population structure in western Alaska. Therefore, transient-type killer whales from the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea are considered to be part of a single population that includes ‘Gulf of Alaska’ transients. Killer whales are seen in the northern Bering Sea and Beaufort Sea, but little is known about these whales.

In summary, within the transient ecotype, association data (Ford et al. 1994, Ford and Ellis 1999, Matkin et al. 1999), acoustic data (Saulitis 1993, Ford and Ellis 1999) and genetic data (Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000) confirm that at least three communities of transient whales exist and represent three discrete populations: 1) Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea transients, 2) AT1 transients, and 3) West Coast transients.

Based on data regarding association patterns, movements, acoustics, genetic differences and potential fishery interactions, eight killer whale stocks are recognized within the Pacific U.S. EEZ: 1) the Alaska Resident stock - occurring from southeastern Alaska to the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, 2) the Northern Resident stock - occurring from British Columbia through part of southeastern Alaska, 3) the Southern Resident stock - occurring mainly within the inland waters of Washington State and southern British Columbia, but also in coastal waters from British Columbia through California, 4) the Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea Transient stock - occurring mainly from Prince William Sound through the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea (see Fig. 24), 5) the AT1 Transient stock - occurring in Alaska from Prince William Sound through the Kenai Fjords, 6) the West Coast Transient stock - occurring from California through southeastern Alaska, 7) the Offshore stock - occurring from California through Alaska, and 8) the Hawaiian stock. ‘Transient’ whales in Canadian waters are considered part of the West Coast Transient stock. The Stock Assessment Reports for the Alaska Region contain information concerning all the killer whale stocks except the Hawaiian and Offshore stocks.

AT1 killer whales were first identified as a separate, cohesive group in 1984, when 22 transient-type whales were documented in Prince William Sound (Leatherwood et al. 1984, Heise et al. 1991), though individual whales from the group had been photographed as early as 1978. Once the North Gulf Oceanic Society began consistent annual research effort in Prince William Sound, AT1 killer whales were re-sighted frequently. In fact, AT1 killer whales were found to be some of the most frequently sighted killer whales in Prince William Sound (Matkin et al. 1993, 1994, 1999). Gulf of Alaska transients are seen less frequently in Prince William Sound, with periods of several years between resightings.

AT1 killer whales have never been seen in association with sympatric resident killer whale pods or with Gulf of Alaska transients (Matkin et al. 1999). As discussed above, the AT1 group was found to be acoustically and genetically different from other transient killer whales in the North Pacific (Saulitis et al. 2005, Barrett-Lennard 2000). The AT1 transients appear to have a more limited geographic range than do other transients. Though seen mostly in Prince William Sound, they have also been seen in Resurrection and Aialik Bays of the Kenai Fjords year-round (Saulitis et al. 2000). Tagging of a single individual in the summer of 2010 showed movements between Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords (Craig Matkin, NGOS, pers. comm., 17 November 2010). However, they have never been observed east of Prince William Sound or west of Kenai Fjords, Alaska, resulting in an apparent range of about 200 miles (Matkin et al. 1999).

POPULATION SIZE

Using photographic identification methods, all 22 individuals in the population were completely censused for the first time in 1984 (Leatherwood et al. 1984). All 22 AT1s were seen annually or biannually from 1984 to 1988 (Matkin et al. 1999, Matkin et al. 2003). The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill occurred in spring of 1989. Nine individuals from the AT1 group have been missing since 1990 (last seen in 1989), and 2 have been missing since 1992 (last seen in 1990 and 1991). Three of the missing AT1s (AT5, AT7, and AT8) were seen near the *Exxon*

Valdez (with AT6) shortly after the spill (Matkin et al. 1993, 1994, Matkin et al. 2008). Two whales were found stranded in 1989-1990, both genetically assigned to the AT1 population and one visually recognized as AT19 (Heise et al. 2003, Matkin et al. 1994, Matkin et al. 2008). Additional mortalities of four older males include whale AT1 found stranded in 2000, AT13 and AT17 missing in 2002 (one of which was thought to be an AT1 carcass found in 2002), and AT14 missing in 2003. A genetically assigned AT1 stranded whale found in 2003 was probably AT14, but could also have been AT13 (Matkin et al. 2008). No births have occurred in this population since 1984 and none of the missing whales have been seen since 2003 and are presumed dead. There is an extremely small probability (0.4%) that AT1 killer whales that are missing for 3 years or more are still alive (Matkin et al. 2008). No AT1 whale missing for at least 4 years has ever been re-sighted (Matkin et al., 2008). All 15 are presumed dead based on criteria that whales are dead if missing from the population for four or more years (Matkin et al. 2008). Therefore, the population size as of the summer of 2011 is seven whales.

Minimum Population Estimate

The abundance estimate of killer whales is a direct count of individually identifiable animals. Only 11 whales were seen between 1990 and 1999. Since then, 4 of those whales have not been seen for four or more consecutive years, so the minimum population estimate is 7 whales (Matkin et al. 2008). Fourteen years of annual effort have failed to discover any whales that had not been seen previously, so there is no reason to believe there are additional whales in the population. Therefore, this minimum population estimate may be the total population size.

Current Population Trend

The population counts have declined from a level of 22 whales in 1989 to 7 whales in 2009, a decline of 68%. Most of the mortalities apparently occurred in 1989-90.

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). Until additional stock-specific 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 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 0.1, as the stock is considered depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and there has been no recruitment into the stock since 1984. Thus, for the AT1 killer whale stock, $PBR = 0$ animals ($7 \times 0.02 \times 0.1$).

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

The known range of the AT1 stock is limited to waters of Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords. There are no federally managed commercial fisheries in this area. State managed commercial fisheries prosecuted within the range of this stock, such as the Prince William Sound salmon set and drift gillnet fisheries, and various herring fisheries, are not known to incur incidental serious injuries or mortalities of AT1 killer whales.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

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

Other Mortality

Collisions with boats may be an occasional source of mortality of killer whales. One mortality due to a ship strike occurred in 1998 when a killer whale struck the propeller of a vessel in the Bering Sea groundfish trawl fishery; however, this mortality did not involve a whale from the AT1 stock. There have been no known mortalities of AT1 killer whales due to ship strikes. Most of the mortality occurred from 1989-1991 following the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

STATUS OF STOCK

The AT1 Transient stock of killer whales was designated as “depleted” under the MMPA and is therefore classified as a strategic stock. Based on currently available data, the estimated annual U. S. commercial fishery-related mortality level (0) does not exceed 10% of the PBR (0) and, therefore, can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. At least 11 animals were alive in 1998, but it appears that as of 2009, only 7 individuals remain alive. The AT1 group has been reduced to 32% (7/22) of its 1984 level. The AT1 Transient stock of killer whales is not listed as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act.

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