

NARWHAL (*Monodon monoceros*): Unidentified Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Narwhals typically inhabit waters of the Arctic Ocean. They are common in the waters of Nunavut, Canada, west Greenland, and in the European Arctic; however, they rarely occur in the East Siberian, Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas (COSEWIC 2004). The three recognized populations of narwhals are based on summer distribution: Baffin Bay, Hudson Bay, and east Greenland (DFO 1998a, 1998b; COSEWIC 2004). The Baffin Bay population of narwhals summers in the waters of West Greenland and the Canadian High Arctic and overwinters in Baffin Bay and Davis Strait (Koski and Davis 1994; Dietz et al. 2001; Heide-Jørgensen et al. 2003). Narwhals from the northwest Hudson Bay population are thought to overwinter in eastern Hudson Strait (Richard 1991). The east Greenland population is believed to winter in the pack ice between eastern Greenland and Svalbard (Dietz et al. 1994). The amount of interchange between these populations is unknown; population definition is based on management purposes, and these designated populations may actually consist of several populations (COSEWIC 2004). Population definition based on molecular genetics studies of narwhals remains unresolved (Palsbøll et al. 1997; de March et al. 2001, 2003).

Local observations and traditional ecological knowledge are the primary source for observation data of narwhals in Alaska waters, dating back to the 1800s (Bee and Hall 1956, Geist et al. 1960, Noongwook et al. 2007, George and Suydam unpubl. ms.). The earliest record dates back to 1874, with most records occasional sightings occurring around the area east of Point Barrow (Scammon 1874, Ray and Murdoch 1885, Turner 1886, Nelson and True 1887, Murdoch 1898, MacFarlane 1905, Dufresne 1946, Anderson 1947, Bee and Hall 1956, Geist et al. 1960). Narwhal occurrences are reported in Bee and Hall (1956) from Pt. Barrow to the Colville River Delta. Ljungblad et al. (1983) reported on a sighting of two male narwhals that occurred northwest of King Island in the Bering Sea, just south of the Bering Strait, during a systematic scientific survey. Sightings have occurred in Russian waters of the northern Chukchi Sea in Russian waters (Reeves and Tracey 1980, Yablokov and Bel'kovich 1968). George and Suydam (unpubl. ms.) summarized observations from Alaska Native hunters during eight sighting events of narwhals in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas between 1989 and 2008. Of these records, seven were sightings of live animals totaling 11-12 individuals; one record was a report of a beach cast narwhal tusk at Cape Sabine. Four of the seven sightings of live animals consisted of mixed groups of beluga and narwhals (George and Suydam unpubl. ms.). It is believed that these incidental sightings of narwhals occurring in the Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering seas are whales from the Baffin Bay population that are known to move into the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and as far north and west as ice conditions will permit (COSEWIC 2004).

Several specimens of narwhals collected in Alaska have been documented. Huey (1952) reported on a specimen collected near Cape Halkett, Harrison Bay, at the mouth of the Colville River. Three additional specimen records from various locations were documented in Geist et al. (1960); one specimen was found dead on the beach of Kiwalik Bay (Kotzebue Sound), another was initially sighted alive at the mouth of the Caribou River in Nelson Lagoon on the Alaska Peninsula but later died, and a third specimen of a narwhal tusk was found on the beach at Wainwright. Murie (1936) reported on a single tusk that was found on a sandbar at Cape Chibukak, St. Lawrence Island.



Figure 20. Potential distribution of narwhals in Arctic waters based on extralimital sightings and strandings (George and Suydam, unpubl. ms., Reeves and Tracey 1980, COSEWIC 2004).

Which of the Canadian populations narwhal in Alaska belong is unknown. There are insufficient data to apply the phylogeographic approach to stock structure (Dizon et al. 1992) for narwhal.

POPULATION SIZE

Reliable estimates of abundance for narwhal in Alaska are currently unavailable.

Minimum Population Estimate

At this time, it is not possible to produce a reliable minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) for this stock, as current estimates of abundance are unavailable.

Current Population Trend

At present, reliable data on trends in population abundance are unavailable.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate is currently unavailable for narwhals in Alaska. Hence, until additional data become available, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be employed (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: $\text{PBR} = N_{\text{MIN}} \times 0.5R_{\text{MAX}} \times F_{\text{R}}$. The recovery factor (F_{R}) for these stocks is 0.5, the value for cetacean stocks with unknown population status (Wade and Angliss 1997). However, in the absence of a reliable estimate of minimum abundance, the PBR for this stock is unknown.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

There are no U. S. commercial fisheries operating within the range of the narwhals in Alaska. There are no observer program records of narwhal mortalities incidental to commercial fisheries in Alaska. The estimated annual mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is zero.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

There is no known subsistence harvest of narwhals by Alaska Natives.

STATUS OF STOCK

Narwhals are not listed as “depleted” under the MMPA or listed as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act. Reliable estimates of the minimum population, population trend, PBR, and status of the stock relative to its Optimum Sustainable Population size are currently not available. There are no federal or state commercial fisheries operating in the marine waters of the Arctic, and there are no reports of serious injury or mortality of narwhals in Alaska, so the level of serious injury and mortality is considered insignificant and approaching zero. The estimated annual rate of human-caused mortality and serious injury is believed to be zero for this stock. Thus, the Alaska stock of narwhals is not classified as strategic.

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