

MESOPLODONT BEAKED WHALES (*Mesoplodon* spp.): California/Oregon/Washington Stocks

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Mesoplodont beaked whales are distributed throughout deep waters and along the continental slopes of the North Pacific Ocean. At least 5 species in this genus have been recorded off the U.S. west coast, but due to the rarity of records and the difficulty in identifying these animals in the field, virtually no species-specific information is available (Mead 1989). The five species known to occur in this region are: Blainville's beaked whale (*M. densirostris*), Hector's beaked whale, (*M. hectori*), Stejneger's beaked whale (*M. stejnegeri*), Ginkgo-toothed beaked whale (*M. ginkgodens*), and Hubbs' beaked whale (*M. carlhubbsi*). Insufficient sighting records exist off the U.S. west coast (Figure 1) to determine any possible spatial or seasonal patterns in the distribution of mesoplodont beaked whales.

Until methods of distinguishing these five species are developed, the management unit must be defined to include all *Mesoplodon* stocks in this region. However, in the future, species-level management is desirable, and a high priority should be placed on finding means to obtain species-specific abundance information. For the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) stock assessment reports, three *Mesoplodon* stocks are defined: 1) all *Mesoplodon* species off California, Oregon and Washington (this report), 2) *M. stejnegeri* in Alaskan waters, and 3) *M. densirostris* in Hawaiian waters.

POPULATION SIZE

Although mesoplodont beaked whales have been sighted along the U.S. west coast on several line transect surveys utilizing both aerial and shipboard platforms, sightings have generally been too rare to produce reliable population estimates, and species identification has been problematic. Previous abundance estimates have been imprecise and biased downward by an unknown amount because of the large proportion of time mesoplodont beaked whales spend submerged, and because the surveys on which they were based covered only California waters, and thus could not include animals off Oregon/Washington. Furthermore, there were a large number of unidentified beaked whale sightings, which were either *Mesoplodon* sp. or Cuvier's beaked whales (*Ziphius cavirostris*). Recent analyses (Barlow and Gerrodette 1996, Barlow and Sexton 1996, Barlow 1997) have resulted in improved estimates of abundance by 1) combining data from three surveys conducted within 300 nmi of the coasts of California (in 1991 and 1993; Barlow and Gerrodette 1996) and California, Oregon and Washington (in 1996; Barlow 1997), 2) whenever possible, assigning unidentified beaked whale sightings to *Mesoplodon* spp. or *Ziphius cavirostris* based on written descriptions, size estimates, and 'most probable identifications' made by the observers at the time of the sightings, and 3) estimating a correction factor for animals missed because they are submerged, based on dive-interval data collected for mesoplodont whales in 1993-95 (about 26% of all trackline groups are estimated to be seen). The first species-specific abundance estimate is now available for Blainville's beaked whale, which was identified once during the 1993 cruise. Because their distribution varies and animals probably spend time outside the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, a multi-year average abundance estimate is the most appropriate for management within U.S. waters. The 1991-96 weighted average abundance estimates for California, Oregon and Washington waters based on the above analyses are 3,738 (CV=0.50) mesoplodont beaked whales of unknown species plus 360 (CV=2.0) Blainville's beaked whales (Barlow 1997, with corrected CV).

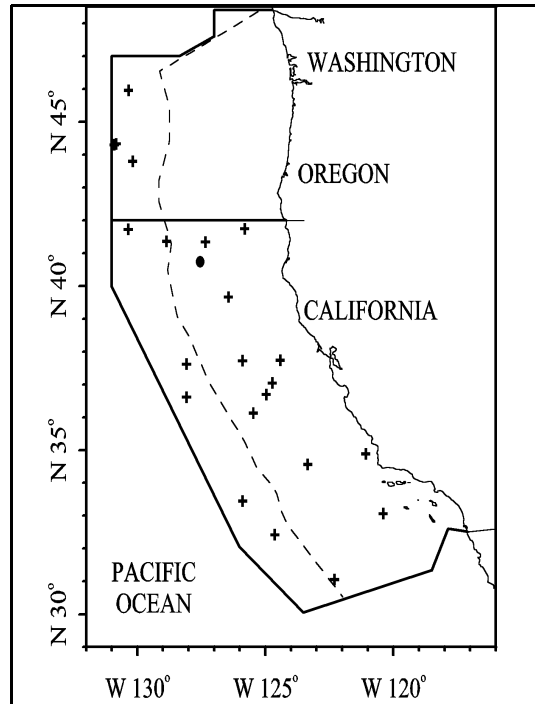


Figure 1. *Mesoplodon* beaked whale sightings based on aerial and shipboard surveys off California, Oregon and Washington, 1991-96 (see Appendix 2, Figures 1-5, for data sources and information on timing and location of survey effort). Key: ● = *Mesoplodon densirostris*, + = *Mesoplodon* spp. Dashed line represents the U.S. EEZ, thick line indicates the outer boundary of all surveys combined.

Minimum Population Estimate

Based on the combined abundance estimate of 4,098 (CV=0.50), the minimum population estimate (defined as the log-normal 20th percentile of the abundance estimate) for mesoplodont beaked whales in California, Oregon, and Washington is 2,734 animals. This includes a species-specific minimum abundance estimate of 123 Blainville's beaked whales.

Current Population Trend

Due to the rarity of sightings of these species on surveys along the U.S. West coast, no information exists regarding possible trends in abundance.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

No information on current or maximum net productivity rates is available for mesoplodont beaked whales.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (2,734) times one half the default maximum net growth rate for cetaceans ($\frac{1}{2}$ of 4%) times a recovery factor of 0.50 (for a species of unknown status with no known recent fishery mortality; Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 27 mesoplodont beaked whales per year. This includes at least 1.1 Blainville's beaked whales.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

A summary of recent fishery mortality and injury for mesoplodont beaked whales in this region is shown in Table 1. More detailed information on these fisheries is provided in Appendix 1). Mortality estimates for the California drift gillnet fishery are included for the five most recent years of monitoring, 1994-98 (Julian and Beeson 1998; Julian 1997; Cameron and Forney 1999). A recently completed genetic analysis of tissue samples has allowed the reliable identification of the majority of these animals (Henshaw et al. 1997). Based on past patterns of identification (NMFS, unpublished data), the remaining unidentified beaked whale is likely to have been a *Mesoplodon* sp. After the 1997 implementation of a Take Reduction Plan, which included skipper education workshops and required the use of pingers and minimum 6-fathom extenders, overall cetacean entanglement rates in the drift gillnet fishery dropped considerably (Barlow and Cameron 1999). However, because of interannual variability in entanglement rates and the relative rarity of mesoplodont beaked whale entanglements, additional years of data will be required to fully evaluate the effectiveness of pingers for reducing mortality of this group of species. Because of the changes in this fishery after implementation of the Take Reduction Plan, mean annual takes in Table 1 are based only on 1997-98 data. This results in an average estimated annual mortality of zero mesoplodont beaked whales.

Drift gillnet fisheries for swordfish and sharks exist along the entire Pacific coast of Baja California, and may take animals from the same populations. Quantitative data are available only for the Mexican swordfish drift gillnet fishery, which uses vessels, gear, and operational procedures similar to those in the U.S. drift gillnet fishery, although nets may be up to 4.5 km long (Holts and Sosa-Nishizaki 1998). The fleet increased from two vessels in 1986 to 31 vessels in 1993 (Holts and Sosa-Nishizaki 1998). The total number of sets in this fishery in 1992 can be estimated from data provided by these authors to be approximately 2700, with an observed rate of marine mammal bycatch of 0.13 animals per set (10 marine mammals in 77 observed sets; Sosa-Nishizaki et al. 1993). This overall mortality rate is similar to that observed in California driftnet fisheries during 1990-95 (0.14 marine mammals per set; Julian and Beeson, 1998), but species-specific information is not available for the Mexican fisheries. There are currently efforts underway to convert the Mexican swordfish driftnet fishery to a longline fishery (D. Holts, pers. comm.).

STATUS OF STOCKS

The status of mesoplodont beaked whales in California, Oregon and Washington waters relative to OSP is not known, and there are insufficient data to evaluate trends in abundance. No habitat issues are known to be of concern for this species, but in recent years questions have been raised regarding potential effects of human-made sounds on

Table 1. Summary of available information on the incidental mortality and injury of *Mesoplodon* beaked whales (California/Oregon/Washington Stocks) in commercial fisheries that might take these species. All observed entanglements of *Mesoplodon* beaked whales resulted in the death of the animal. Coefficients of variation for mortality estimates are provided in parentheses. Mean annual takes are based on 1994-98 data unless noted otherwise.

Fishery Name	Data Type	Year(s)	Percent Observer Coverage	Observed Mortality	Estimated Annual Mortality	Mean Annual Takes (CV in parentheses)
CA/OR thresher shark/swordfish drift gillnet fishery	Hubbs' beaked whale, <i>Mesoplodon carlhubbsi</i>					
	observer data	1994	17.9%	2	11 (0.64)	0 ¹
		1995	15.6%	0	0	
		1996	12.4%	0	0	
		1997	23.0%	0	0	
		1998	20.0%	0	0	
	Stejneger's beaked whale, <i>Mesoplodon stejnegeri</i>					
	observer data	1994	17.9%	1	6 (0.91)	0 ¹
		1995	15.6%	0	0	
		1996	12.4%	0	0	
		1997	23.0%	0	0	
		1998	20.0%	0	0	
	Unidentified beaked whale (probably <i>Mesoplodon</i>)					
	observer data	1994	17.9%	1	6 (0.90)	0 ¹
		1995	15.6%	0	0	
1996		12.4%	0	0		
1997		23.0%	0	0		
1998		20.0%	0	0		
Minimum total annual takes of <i>Mesoplodon</i> beaked whales					0	

¹ Only 1997-98 mortality estimates are included in the average because of gear modifications implemented within the fishery as part of a 1997 Take Reduction Plan. Gear modifications included the use of net extenders and acoustic warning devices (pingers).

deep-diving cetacean species, such as mesoplodont beaked whales (Richardson et al. 1995). In particular, Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS) has been implicated in the mass stranding of beaked whales in the Mediterranean Sea (Frantzis 1998) and more recently in the Caribbean. None of the five species is listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act nor considered "depleted" under the MMPA. Including driftnet mortality only for years after implementation of the Take Reduction Plan (1997-98), the average annual human-caused mortality in 1994-98 is zero. Because recent mortality is zero, mesoplodont beaked whales are not classified as a "strategic" stock under the MMPA, and the total fishery mortality and serious injury for this stock can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero. It is likely that the difficulty in identifying these animals in the field will remain a critical obstacle to obtaining species-specific abundance estimates and stock assessments in the future.

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