

FRASER'S DOLPHIN (*Lagenodelphis hosei*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Fraser's dolphin is distributed worldwide in tropical waters (Perrin et al. 1994). Sightings of these animals in the northern Gulf of Mexico occur primarily over the deeper waters off the continental shelf (Leatherwood et al. 1993). Fraser's dolphins have been observed recently in the northern Gulf of Mexico during the spring, summer, and fall (Leatherwood et al. 1993), and also were seen in the winter during recent seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1993-1995 (Davis et al., in preparation). There is no information on stock differentiation for the Atlantic population.

POPULATION SIZE

Estimates of abundance were derived through the application of distance sampling analysis (Buckland et al. 1993) and the computer program DISTANCE (Laake et al. 1993) to sighting data collected during 1991-1994 spring-summer, visual sampling, line-transect vessel surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico (Hansen et al. 1995) (Fig. 1), which includes data collected as part of the GulfCet program (Davis et al., in preparation). These surveys were conducted throughout the area from approximately the 200 m isobath along the U.S. coast to the seaward extent of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. The seasonal GulfCet aerial surveys included only a small portion of the stock range and these data were not used for abundance estimation. Estimated abundance of Fraser's dolphins by survey year [coefficient of variation (CV) in parentheses] was zero in 1991, 443 in 1992 (0.92), and zero in 1993 and 1994 (Hansen et al. 1995). Survey effort-weighted estimated average abundance of Fraser's dolphins for all vessel surveys combined was 127 (CV = 0.90) (Hansen et al. 1995).

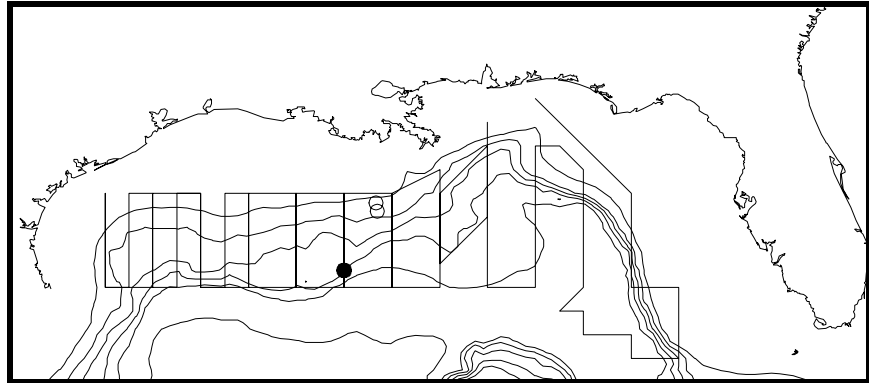


Figure 1. Distribution of Fraser's dolphin sightings during NOAA Ship Oregon II surveys during 1991-1994 (filled circle) and during GulfCet seasonal aerial surveys (unfilled circles). The straight lines show transects during two ship surveys and are examples of typical survey transects. Isobaths are in 183 m (100 fm) intervals.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population size was estimated from the average estimate abundance which was 127 Fraser's dolphins (CV = 0.90) (Hansen et al. 1995). The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate, which is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by NMFS (Anon. 1994). The minimum population estimate is 66 Fraser's dolphins.

Current Population Trend

No trend was identified in the annual abundance estimates. There were no observations of Fraser's dolphins during 1991 and 1993 vessel surveys, and the 1992 estimate is based on only one observation (Hansen et al. 1995); however, five other sightings of Fraser's dolphins were documented in the northern Gulf of Mexico during other surveys in 1992, 1993 and 1994 (Leatherwood et al. 1993, SEFSC unpublished data). The apparent differences in abundance estimates may have been caused by low sampling intensity relative to population size (Hansen et al. 1995) or by inter-annual variation in distribution patterns or spatial sampling patterns, rather than changes in population size.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are not known; therefore, the default maximum net productivity rate of 0.04 (Anon. 1994) was used for purposes of this assessment.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal level (PBR) was specified as the product of the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate, and a recovery factor for endangered, threatened, or depleted stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP) (Anon. 1994). The recovery factor was set at 0.50 because the status of the stock relative to OSP is unknown. PBR for this stock is 0.7 Fraser's dolphins.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

The level of past or current, direct, human-caused mortality of Fraser's dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico is unknown. Available information indicates there likely is little, if any, fisheries interaction with Fraser's dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico. There have been no logbook reports of fishery-related mortality or serious injury and no fishery-related mortality or serious injury has been observed.

There were no documented strandings of Fraser's dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico during 1987-1994 which were classified as likely caused by fishery interactions or other human-related causes. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the marine mammals which die or are seriously injured may wash ashore, nor will all of those that do wash ashore necessarily show signs of entanglement or other fishery-interaction. Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of fishery interaction.

Available information indicates there likely is little, if any, fisheries interaction with Fraser's dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico. The total known fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is less than 10% of the calculated PBR and, therefore, can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. This determination cannot be made for specific fisheries until the implementing regulations for Section 118 of the MMPA have been reviewed by the public and finalized.

Fisheries Information

Pelagic swordfish, tunas, and billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico. Total longline effort for the Gulf of Mexico pelagic fishery, including OCS edge, continental slope, and Mexican territorial waters, based on mandatory logbook reporting, was 4,400 sets in 1991, 4,850 sets in 1992, and 3,260 sets in 1993 (Cramer 1994). This fishery has been monitored with about 5% observer coverage, in terms of trips observed, since 1992. There were no reports of mortality or serious injury of Fraser's dolphins by this fishery.

Pair trawl fishing gear has the potential to capture marine mammals, but there have been no reports of mortality or serious injury to marine mammals in the Gulf of Mexico. This fishery has not been observed by NMFS observers, and there are no other data available as to the extent of this fishery in the Gulf of Mexico.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of this stock relative to OSP is unknown and there are insufficient data to determine population trends. This species is not listed under the Endangered Species Act. The total level of human-caused mortality and serious injury is unknown, but it is believed to be insignificant relative to PBR; therefore this is not a strategic stock.

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