

MELON-HEADED WHALE (*Peponocephala electra*): Hawaiian Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Melon-headed whales are found in tropical and warm-temperate waters throughout the world. The distribution of reported sightings suggests that the oceanic habitat of this species is primarily equatorial waters (Perryman et al. 1994). Small numbers have been taken in the eastern tropical Pacific, and they are occasionally killed in direct fisheries in Japan and elsewhere in the western Pacific. Large herds are seen regularly in Hawaiian waters, especially off the Waianae coast of Oahu, the north Kohala coast of Hawaii, and the leeward coast of Lanai (Shallenberger 1981). A comprehensive shipboard survey of the Hawaiian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), resulted in only one sighting of melon-headed whales (Figure 1; Barlow 2006). Inter-island movements from Kauai to Hawaii have been documented and genetic samples from at least 82 animals are available for future stock structure analyses (R.W. Baird, pers. comm.). Little is known about this species elsewhere in its range, and most knowledge about its biology comes from mass strandings (Perryman et al. 1994). Fourteen strandings are known from Hawaii (Nishiwaki and Norris 1966; Shallenberger 1981; Nitta 1991; Maldini et al. 2005). For the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) stock assessment reports, there is a single Pacific management stock including animals found both within the Hawaiian Islands EEZ and in adjacent international waters. Because data on abundance, distribution, and human-caused impacts are largely lacking for international waters, the status of this stock is evaluated based on data from U.S. EEZ waters of the Hawaiian Islands (NMFS 2005).

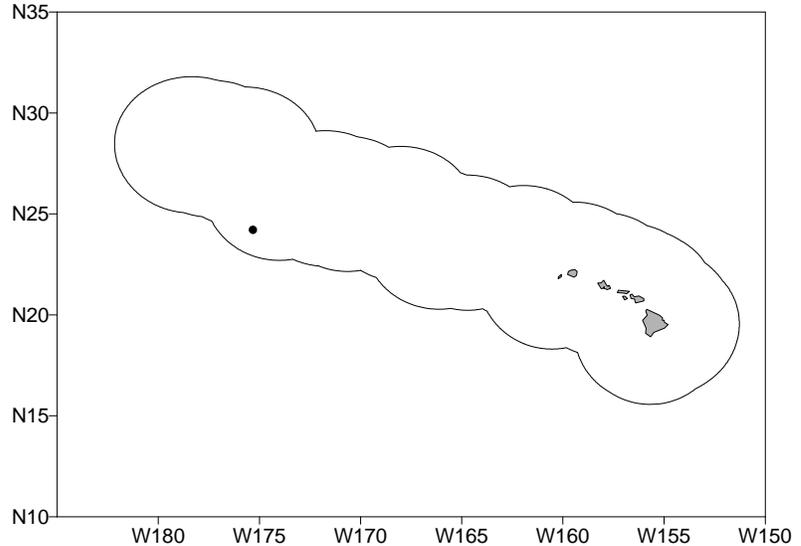


Figure 1. Melon-headed whale sighting location during the 2002 shipboard survey of U.S. EEZ waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands (Barlow 2006; see Appendix 2 for details on timing and location of survey effort). Outer line represents approximate boundary of survey area and U.S. EEZ.

POPULATION SIZE

An abundance estimate of melon-headed whales is available for the eastern tropical Pacific (Wade and Gerrodette 1993), but it is not known whether any of these animals are part of the same population that occurs around the Hawaiian Islands. A 2002 shipboard line-transect survey of the entire Hawaiian Islands EEZ resulted in an abundance estimate of 2,950 (CV=1.17) melon-headed whales (Barlow 2006). This is currently the best available abundance estimate for this stock.

Minimum Population Estimate

The log-normal 20th percentile of the 2002 abundance estimate (Barlow 2006) is 1,350 melon-headed whales in the Hawaiian Islands EEZ.

Current Population Trend

No data are available on current population trend.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

No data are available on current or maximum net productivity rate.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size within the U.S. EEZ of the Hawaiian Islands (1,350) times one half the default maximum net growth rate for cetaceans (½ of 4%) times a recovery factor of 0.50 (for a species of unknown status with no known fishery mortality; Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 14 melon-headed whales per year.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

Information on fishery-related mortality and serious injury of cetaceans in Hawaiian waters is limited, but the gear types used in Hawaiian fisheries are responsible for marine mammal mortality and serious injury in other fisheries throughout U.S. waters. Gillnets appear to capture marine mammals wherever they are used, and float lines from lobster traps and longlines can be expected to occasionally entangle cetaceans (Perrin et al. 1994).

Interactions with cetaceans have been reported for all Hawaiian pelagic fisheries (Nitta and Henderson 1993), but no interactions with melon-headed whales have been documented. There are currently two distinct longline fisheries based in Hawaii: a deep-set longline (DSL) fishery that targets primarily tunas, and a shallow-set longline fishery (SSL) that targets swordfish. Both fisheries operate within U.S. waters and on the high seas. Between 2004 and 2008, no melon-headed whales were observed hooked or entangled in the SSL fishery (100% observer coverage) or the DSL fishery (20-28% observer coverage) (McCracken & Forney 2010). Interaction rates between dolphins and the NWHI bottomfish fishery have been estimated based on studies conducted in 1990-1993, indicating that an average of 2.67 dolphin interactions, most likely involving bottlenose and rough-toothed dolphins, occurred for every 1000 fish brought on board (Kobayashi and Kawamoto 1995). Fishermen claim interactions with dolphins that steal bait and catch are increasing. It is not known whether these interactions result in serious injury or mortality of dolphins, nor whether melon-headed whales are involved.

Other Mortality

In recent years, there has been increasing concern that loud underwater sounds, such as active sonar and seismic operations, may be harmful to beaked whales (Cox et al. 2006) and other cetaceans, including melon-headed whales (Southall et al. 2006) and pygmy killer whales (*Feresa attenuata*) (Wang and Yang 2006). The use of active sonar from military vessels has been implicated in mass strandings of beaked whales and recent mass-stranding reports suggest some delphinids may be impacted as well. A 2004 mass-stranding of melon-headed whales in Hanalei Bay, Kauai occurred during a multi-national sonar training event around Hawaii (Southall et al. 2006). Although data limitations preclude a conclusive finding regarding the role of Navy sonar in triggering this event, sonar transmissions were considered a plausible, if not likely cause of the mass stranding based on the spatiotemporal link between the sonar exercises and the stranding, the direction of movement of the transmitting vessels near Hanalei Bay, and propagation modeling suggesting the sonar transmissions would have been audible at the mouth of Hanalei Bay (Southall et al 2006; Brownell et al. 2009). Additional research on the behavioral response of delphinids in the presence of sonar transmissions is needed in order to understand the level of impact. No estimates of potential mortality or serious injury are available for U.S. waters.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of melon-headed whales in Hawaiian waters relative to OSP is unknown, and there are insufficient data to evaluate trends in abundance. No habitat issues are known to be of concern for this species. It is not listed as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (1973), nor as “depleted” under the MMPA. Given the absence of recent fishery-related mortality or serious injuries, the Hawaiian stock of melon-headed whales is not considered strategic under the 1994 amendments to the MMPA, and the total fishery mortality and serious injury can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero.

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