

BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops truncatus*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Coastal Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The northern Gulf of Mexico coastal bottlenose dolphin stock has been defined for management purposes as those bottlenose dolphins occupying the nearshore coastal waters in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico from the Mississippi River mouth to approximately 84° W longitude, from shore, barrier islands, or presumed bay boundaries to 9.3 km seaward of the 18.3 m isobath (Fig. 1). As a working hypothesis, it is assumed that the dolphins occupying habitats with dissimilar climactic, coastal, and oceanographic characteristics might be restricted in their movements between habitats and, thus, constitute separate stocks. The northern coastal stock area is characterized by a temperate climate, barrier islands, sand beaches, coastal marshes and marsh islands, and has a relatively high level of fresh water input from rivers and streams. It is bordered on the east by an extensive area of coastal marsh and marsh islands typical of Florida's Apalachee Bay. The western coastal area is characterized by an arid to temperate climate, sand beaches, and low fresh water input. The eastern coastal stock area is temperate to subtropical in climate, is bordered by a mixture of coastal marshes, sand beaches, marsh and mangrove islands, and has an intermediate level of freshwater input.



Figure 1. Sightings of coastal bottlenose dolphins during GOMEX aerial surveys of the Gulf of Mexico in 1992-1994. Northern Gulf of Mexico coastal bottlenose dolphin stock is shown with filled circles. Isobaths are in 183 m (100 fm) intervals.

The definition of this stock may be changed and it may be incorporated with other Gulf of Mexico stocks when more data become available. Seasonal changes in bottlenose dolphin abundance in Mississippi Sound (NMFS unpublished data) suggests that there is interchange with at least that portion of the Gulf of Mexico bay and sound stocks; however, its extent and significance is not presently known. Portions of this stock may co-occur with the U.S. Gulf of Mexico outer continental shelf (OCS) stock. The seaward boundary for this stock corresponds to aerial survey strata (NMFS unpublished data) and thus, represents a management boundary rather than an ecological boundary. Anecdotal evidence suggests that both the coastal and OCS stocks consist of the shallow, warm water ecotype described by Hersh and Duffield (1990). Data are not currently available to determine genetically if the stocks should be separated or, if so, where; and interbreeding may occur at the boundary interface.

POPULATION SIZE

Preliminary estimates of abundance were derived using distance sampling analysis (Buckland et al. 1993) and the computer program DISTANCE (Laake et al. 1993) with sighting data collected during aerial line-transect surveys in September-October 1993 (Blaylock and Hoggard 1994). Systematic sampling transects, placed randomly with respect to the bottlenose dolphin distribution, extended orthogonally from shore out to approximately 9 km past the 18 m isobath. The area surveyed extended from the Mississippi River mouth to approximately 84° W Longitude, and approximately 5% of the total area was visually searched. Bottlenose dolphin abundance was estimated to be 4,191 dolphins with coefficient of variation (CV) = 0.21 (Blaylock and Hoggard 1994).

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate was based on the 1993 abundance estimate of 4,191 dolphins (CV = 0.21) (Blaylock and Hoggard 1994). 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 distribution as specified by NMFS (Anon. 1994). The minimum population estimate is 3,518 bottlenose dolphins.

Current Population Trend

Aerial surveys of this area conducted partly in autumn 1983 and partly in autumn 1985, by NMFS resulted in an estimated bottlenose dolphin abundance of 1,319 (CV = 0.10). The data are not sufficient to conduct a statistical trend analysis, but the current population size estimate is significantly higher than the 1983-85 estimate (Student's t-test, $P < 0.005$).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates for this stock are unknown. The maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.04 for purposes of this assessment. This value is based on theoretical calculations showing that cetacean populations may not generally grow at rates much greater than 4% given the constraints of their reproductive life history (Reilly and Barlow 1986).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal (PBR) has been specified as the product of minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate, and a "recovery" factor for endangered, depleted, threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population size (OSP). The recovery factor was set at 0.50 because of the stock's unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population levels, because the stock apparently sustains some unknown level of fishery-related mortality, and because of the unknown effects of the 1993 mortality event. PBR for this stock is 35 dolphins.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

The level of direct human-caused mortality in this stock is unknown. An annual average of ten bottlenose dolphins (CV = 0.41) stranded on the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama during the period 1988-1993, showing signs of fishery interactions such as net entanglement, mutilation, gunshot wounds, etc. (Southeast U.S. Marine Mammal Stranding Network unpublished data). This was 8.2% of the total bottlenose dolphin strandings reported for this area. There are a number of difficulties associated with the interpretation of stranding data. It is possible that some or all of the stranded dolphins may have been from a bay, sound or estuarine stock; however, the proportion of the stranded dolphins belonging to another stock cannot be determined because of the difficulty of determining from where the stranded carcass originated. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the dolphins which die or are seriously injured in fishery interactions 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.

The total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is unknown, but considering the evidence from stranding data, it may not be less than 10% of the calculated PBR and, therefore, cannot be considered to be 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

Annual fishing effort for the shrimp trawl fishery in the northern Gulf of Mexico coastal stock area during 1988-1993 averaged approximately 2.17 million hours of tows (CV = 0.13) (NMFS unpublished data). This fishery was monitored by NMFS observers in 1992 and 1993, but less than 1% of the fishing effort was observed (NMFS unpublished data). There have been no reports of incidental mortality or injury in the northern Gulf of Mexico coastal bottlenose dolphin stock associated with the shrimp trawl fishery in this area.

The menhaden purse seine fishery targets the Atlantic menhaden, *Brevortia tyrannus*, in Gulf of Mexico coastal waters approximately 3-18 m in depth (NMFS 1991). Seventy-five menhaden vessels operate within 1.6 km of shore from Apalachicola, Florida to Freeport, Texas, from April-October. Lethal takes of bottlenose dolphins reported by the menhaden fishery during the period 1982-1988 ranged between 0-4 dolphins annually (NMFS unpublished data).

Other clupeid purse seiners opportunistically target Spanish sardine, thread herring, ladyfish, cigarfish, and blue runners. Single boat purse seiners, fishing for sardines and herrings, operate in coastal waters between the Mississippi River delta and Pascagoula, Mississippi and in the Florida panhandle between Pensacola and Apalachicola. It is estimated that ten vessels participate in this fishery between May-October. There are no estimates of dolphin mortality associated with this fishery.

Gillnets are not used in Texas, and gillnets over 46 m³ in area will not be allowed in Florida past July 1995, but fixed and runaround gillnets are currently in use in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. These fisheries, for the most part, operate year around. They are state-controlled and licensed, and vary widely in intensity and target species. No marine mammal mortalities associated with gillnet fisheries have been reported in these states, but stranding data suggest that gillnet and marine mammal interaction does occur, causing mortality and serious injury.

The fishery for blue crabs operates in estuarine areas throughout the Gulf coast employing traps attached to a buoy with rope. Bottlenose dolphins have been reported stranded in Mississippi with polypropylene rope around their flukes indicating the possibility of entanglement with crab pot lines (NMFS 1991); however, this fishery has not been monitored by observers.

Other Mortality

The nearshore habitat occupied by this stock is adjacent to areas of high human population. Two stranded dolphins from the northern Gulf coastal area (one from Mississippi and one from Alabama) had the highest levels of DDT derivatives of any of the bottlenose dolphin liver samples analyzed in conjunction with the 1990 mortality investigation conducted by NMFS (Varanasi et al. 1992). The significance of these findings are unclear, but there is some evidence that increased exposure to anthropogenic compounds may reduce immune function in bottlenose dolphins. A recent study found the magnitude of the serum antibody titer to *Erysipelas* spp. and *Staphylococcus* spp. bacteria in bottlenose dolphins was inversely related to α -HCB, p,p,DDE, and PCB's concentrations (Reif et al., in preparation).

This stock was subject to a high incidence of mortality in 1993, which was suspected to have been the result of a morbillivirus epidemic. The effect of this mortality event on the stock cannot be determined, in part, because the mortality may have also affected the bay, sound and estuarine stock and the stock identity of the stranded animals could not be determined. The increase in mortalities began in the Florida panhandle area and moved westward during that period (NMFS unpublished data). Concentrations of contaminants were found to be higher in dolphins having evidence of exposure to the cetacean morbillivirus (Reif et al., in preparation). The reason for the relationship between cetacean morbillivirus antibody titers and high contaminant levels is not understood and the effect of the epidemic on this stock has not been determined.

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of this stock relative to OSP is not known and population trends cannot be determined due to insufficient data. This species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. This is not a strategic stock because the known level of fishery-related mortality or serious injury does not exceed PBR.

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