

## ATLANTIC SPOTTED DOLPHIN (*Stenella frontalis*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

### STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

There are two species of spotted dolphin in the Atlantic Ocean, the Atlantic spotted dolphin (*Stenella frontalis*) and the pantropical spotted dolphin (*S. attenuata*) (Perrin *et al.* 1987). The Atlantic spotted dolphin occurs in two forms which may be distinct sub-species (Perrin *et al.* 1987, 1994; Rice 1998): the large, heavily spotted form which inhabits the continental shelf and is usually found inside or near the 200m isobath; and the smaller, less spotted island and offshore form which occurs in the Atlantic Ocean but is not known to occur in the Gulf of Mexico (Fulling *et al.* 2003; Mullin and Fulling 2003; Mullin and Fulling 2004). Where they co-occur, the offshore form of the Atlantic spotted dolphin and the pantropical spotted dolphin can be difficult to differentiate at sea.

The Atlantic spotted dolphin is endemic to the Atlantic Ocean in temperate to tropical waters (Perrin *et al.* 1987, 1994). In the Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic spotted dolphins occur primarily from continental shelf waters 10-200m deep to slope waters <500m deep (Fulling *et al.* 2003; Mullin and Fulling 2004). Atlantic spotted dolphins were seen in all seasons during GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico from 1992 to 1998 (Hansen *et al.* 1996; Mullin and Hoggard 2000). It has been suggested that this species may move inshore seasonally during spring, but data supporting this hypothesis are limited (Caldwell and Caldwell 1966; Fritts *et al.* 1983).

In a recent study, Adams and Rosel (2005) presented strong genetic support for differentiation between Gulf of Mexico and western North Atlantic management stocks using both mitochondrial and nuclear markers. However, this study did not test for further population subdivision within the Gulf of Mexico.

### POPULATION SIZE

Estimates of abundance were derived through the application of distance sampling analysis (Buckland *et al.* 2001) and the computer program DISTANCE (Thomas *et al.* 1998) to sighting data. From 1991 through 1994, line-transect vessel surveys were conducted in conjunction with bluefin tuna ichthyoplankton surveys during spring in the northern Gulf of Mexico from the 200m isobath to the seaward extent of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Hansen *et al.* 1995). Annual cetacean surveys were conducted along a fixed plankton sampling trackline. Survey effort-weighted estimated average abundance of Atlantic spotted dolphins for all surveys combined was 3,213 (CV=0.44) (Hansen *et al.* 1995). This is an underestimate because the continental shelf was not entirely covered during these surveys.

Data were collected from 1996 to 2001 during spring and fall plankton surveys conducted from NOAA ships *Oregon II* (1996, 1997, 1999, 2000) and *Gordon Gunter* (1998, 2000, 2001). Tracklines, which were perpendicular to the bathymetry, covered shelf waters from the 20m to the 200m isobaths in the fall of 1998 through 2001. The combined estimated abundance of Atlantic spotted dolphins, pooled from 1999 through 2001, for the fall outer continental shelf shipboard surveys was 27,393 (CV=0.23) (Figure 1, Table 1; Fulling *et al.* 2003). Spring surveys were conducted from April to May 1996 to 2001 (excluding 1998) in oceanic waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico from 200m to the offshore

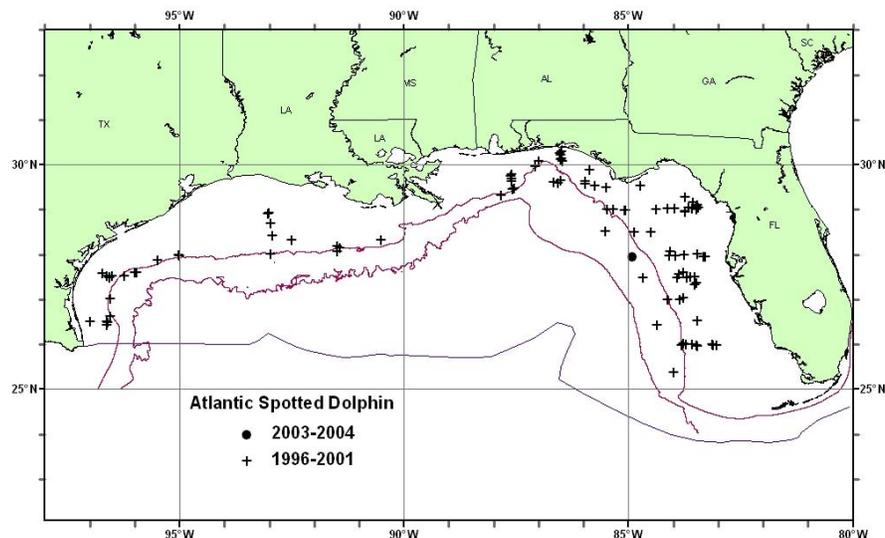


Figure 1. Distribution of Atlantic spotted dolphin sightings from SEFSC spring and fall vessel surveys during 1996-2001 and from summer 2003 and spring 2004 surveys. All the on-effort sightings are shown, though not all were used to estimate abundance. Solid lines indicate the 100m and 1,000m isobaths and the offshore extent of the U.S. EEZ.

extent of the U.S. EEZ. Estimates for all oceanic strata were summed, as survey effort was not uniformly distributed, to calculate a total estimate for the entire northern Gulf of Mexico oceanic waters (Mullin and Fulling 2004). Due to limited survey effort in any given year, survey effort was pooled across all years to develop an average abundance estimate for both areas. The estimate of abundance for Atlantic spotted dolphins in oceanic waters, pooled from 1996 through 2001, was 175 (CV=0.84) (Mullin and Fulling 2004).

During summer 2003 and spring 2004, line-transect surveys dedicated to estimating the abundance of oceanic cetaceans were conducted in the northern Gulf of Mexico. During each year, a grid of uniformly-spaced transect lines from a random start were surveyed from the 200m isobath to the seaward extent of the U.S. EEZ using NOAA Ship *Gordon Gunter* (Mullin 2007). The estimate of abundance for Atlantic spotted dolphins in oceanic waters, pooled from 2003 to 2004, was 0 (Mullin 2007).

As recommended in the GAMMS Workshop Report (Wade and Angliss 1997), estimates older than 8 years are deemed unreliable, and therefore should not be used for PBR determinations. Because most of the data for oceanic estimates prior to 2003 were older than this 8-year limit and due to the different sampling strategies, estimates from the 2003 and 2004 surveys were considered most reliable for oceanic waters.

The best available abundance estimate for the Atlantic spotted dolphin in the northern Gulf of Mexico is the combined estimate of abundance for both the outer continental shelf (fall surveys, 1999-2001) and oceanic waters (spring and summer surveys, 2003-2004), which is 27,393 (CV=0.23) (Table 1). This estimate is considered the best because these surveys have the most complete coverage of the species' habitat.

| Table 1. Abundance estimates ( $N_{best}$ ) and Coefficient of Variation (CV) of Atlantic spotted dolphins in the northern U.S. Gulf of Mexico outer continental shelf (OCS) (waters 20-200m deep) during fall 1999-2001 and oceanic waters (200m to the offshore extent of the EEZ) during spring/summer 2003-2004. |                          |               |             |
|--|--------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Month/Year   | Area                     | $N_{best}$    | CV          |
| Fall 1999-2001   | Outer Continental Shelf  | 27,393        | 0.23        |
| Spring/Summer 2003-2004  | Oceanic                  | 0             | -           |
| <b>Fall &amp; Spring/Summer</b>  | <b>OCS &amp; Oceanic</b> | <b>27,393</b> | <b>0.23</b> |

#### Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for Atlantic spotted dolphins is 27,393 (CV=0.23). The minimum population estimate for the northern Gulf of Mexico is 22,626 Atlantic spotted dolphins.

#### Current Population Trend

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this species.

#### CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. For purposes of this assessment, the maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.04. This value is based on theoretical modeling showing that cetacean populations may not grow at rates much greater than 4% given the constraints of their reproductive history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

#### POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal level (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate and a "recovery" factor (MMPA Sec. 3.16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is 22,626. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The "recovery" factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP), is assumed to be 0.5 because the stock is of unknown status. PBR for the northern Gulf of Mexico Atlantic spotted dolphin is 226.

#### ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

There has been no reported fishing-related mortality of a spotted dolphin during 1998-2005 (Yeung 1999; Yeung 2001; Garrison 2003; Garrison and Richards 2004; Garrison 2005; Fairfield Walsh and Garrison 2006).

### Fisheries Information

The level of past or current, direct, human-caused mortality of Atlantic spotted dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico is unknown; however, interactions between spotted dolphins and fisheries have been observed in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Pelagic swordfish, tunas and billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico. There were 2 observed incidental takes and releases of spotted dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico during 1994, but no recent reported takes of Atlantic spotted dolphins by this fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. Either spotted dolphin species may have been involved in the observed fishery-related mortality and serious injury incidents, but because of the uncertainty in species identification by fishery observers, they cannot currently be separated. Estimated average annual fishing-related mortality and serious injury of spotted dolphins attributable to this fishery during 1991-1993 was 1.5 annually (CV=0.33).

### Other Mortality

A total of 17 Atlantic spotted dolphins stranded in the Gulf of Mexico during 1999-2005 (Table 2 displays 2001-2005 data). There were indications of human interactions for 2 animals that stranded in Alabama during 2004, both of which were classified as likely caused by fishery interactions. 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 in fishery interactions wash ashore, not all that wash ashore are discovered, reported or investigated, 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 interactions.

Table 2. Atlantic spotted dolphin (*Stenella frontalis*) strandings along the U.S. Gulf of Mexico coast, 2001-2005.

| STATE        | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | TOTAL |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Alabama      | 0    | 0    | 1    | 4    | 0    | 5     |
| Florida      | 0    | 0    | 1    | 4    | 2    | 7     |
| Louisiana    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0     |
| Mississippi  | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0     |
| Texas        | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0     |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | 0    | 0    | 2    | 8    | 2    | 12    |

### STATUS OF STOCK

The status of Atlantic spotted dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico, relative to OSP, is unknown. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this species. The total level of U.S. Gulf of Mexico fishery-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock is unknown, but assumed to be less than 10% of the calculated PBR and can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. This is not a strategic stock because average annual fishery-related mortality and serious injury does not exceed PBR.

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