

Atlantic Scientific Review Group

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Dr. Gordon Waring
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
NOAA Fisheries
Woods Hole, MA 02543

Dear Gordon:

Below, please find comments and recommendations arising from the recent meeting Atlantic Scientific Review Group. As always, we appreciate the hard work and collegiality of staff from the Science Centers and Regional Offices.

Stock Assessments:

1. ASRG **expresses concern** about the status of marine mammal stocks in the northern Gulf of Mexico and urges expeditious publication of research devoted to assessments of these stocks, especially those related to potential impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.
2. The ASRG **recommends** that a consistent approach be used across regions and stocks in the presentation of information on mortalities *and* serious injuries. This information should be presented either by including both mortalities and serious injuries in tables in individual SARs or in a summary Technical Memorandum in which additional detail may be presented.
3. The ASRG **recommends** that NOAA Fisheries examine the population structure of minke whales in the North Atlantic. It is possible that more than a single stock of this species exists in the U.S. EEZ (Fig. 1).

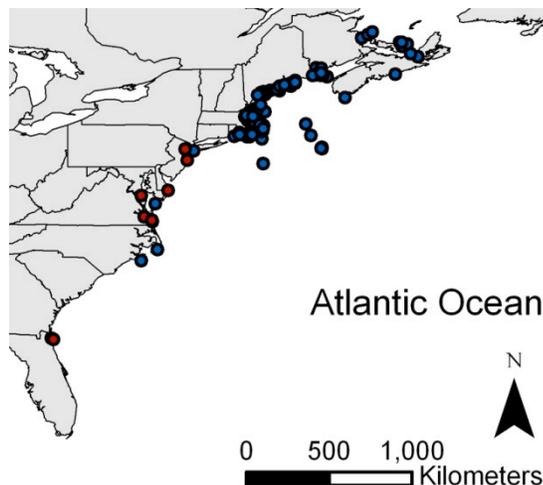


Figure 1 - Minke whale mortalities (1970-2012) and serious injuries (1970-2009) - J van der Hoop, WHOI (pers. comm.). Red = vessel strike, blue = entanglement.

4. The ASRG recognizes the critical nature of regular surveys to obtain abundance estimates of marine mammals and notes that the frequency and extent of these surveys have declined in recent years. In particular, current uncertainties regarding federal funding are jeopardizing some planned surveys. The ASRG **strongly recommends** adequate support for these critical survey efforts. In addition, the ASRG **recommends** that NOAA Fisheries continue to explore alternative approaches to monitoring, particularly for species that are not amenable to traditional visual line transect surveys.

5. The ASRG **recommends** that the Mid-Atlantic migratory corridor be recognized as significant habitat in the North Atlantic right whale SAR.

6. The ASRG notes with concern the apparent decline of harbor seal abundance in the northeastern United States, particularly given that dramatic declines of this species have been noted in the presence of growing gray seal populations in both Canada and the United Kingdom. The ASRG **recommends** that NOAA Fisheries initiate studies to ascertain whether this apparent decline is a function of a change in abundance, distributional changes in the harbor seal population, or an artifact of survey methodology. The ASRG further **recommends** that NOAA Fisheries monitor the abundance of harbor seals at a number of “index haul-out sites”, employing replicate site counts, and compare the demography and population trends of both harbor and gray seals.

8. To better understand the potential for competition between gray and harbor seals, the ASRG **recommends** that NOAA Fisheries improve efforts to collect life history samples and whole carcasses of these and other species taken incidentally in commercial fishing operations in the northeastern United States. Analysis of stomach contents and tissue samples from seals taken incidentally in commercial fisheries operations may provide insights into diets of the two species.

Take Reduction Teams:

1. The ASRG **recommends** that the next HPTRT meeting be held in-person to facilitate dialog amongst team members. We urge NOAA Fisheries to make every effort to facilitate attendance, even if it is not possible for all Team members to attend in person.

2. The ASRG noted the relatively low compliance with mitigation measures in the Harbor Porpoise and Pelagic Longline Take Reduction Plans and **recommends** that NOAA enhance efforts to enforce compliance with regulations designed to reduce serious injury and mortality in these strategic stocks of marine mammals.

Review of Stock Assessment Reports:

1. The ASRG **requests** that it be provided with the opportunity to review any substantive changes to SARs that occur subsequent to ASRG review and before the SARs are published.

2. The ASRG **offers** to review various components of Stock Assessment Reports (e.g., new information on abundance, mortality, population structure) prior to preparation of the draft SAR. This review would be facilitated by the provision of detailed information on these aspects of the assessment (e.g., components of distance sampling framework used to estimate abundance).

3. The ASRG **agrees** to review SI determinations in March of each year in preparation for inclusion of these determinations in the next round of SARs.

Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program:

The ASRG recognizes the importance of the timely and accurate collection of data from stranded marine mammals to provide information on disease threats and human interactions. The ASRG **recommends** that additional resources be made available to stranding programs through funding the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program and increased support to the NOAA Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. Specifically, the ASRG **recommends** that support for aspects of this work that provide information on demography and the development of diagnostic abilities should receive priority over the rehabilitation of individual marine mammals. A national standard program of sampling, analysis, and central data compilation and reporting of level A, B, and C data needs to be established, focusing on selected stranding hotspots around the country. In the opinion of the ASRG, the annually competed, grantee project originated, paradigm of the current Prescott Program does not achieve this.

2014 Annual Meeting

The ASRG **requests** that a full day of its 2014 meeting be devoted to a review of the ecology, demography and status of gray and harbor seals in the northeastern United States, together with a review of the NEFSC research program on these species. The ASRG offers to work with scientists and managers from NOAA Fisheries to identify experts on the ecology of these species who could contribute to this review. To minimize the costs of holding this review the ASRG **suggests** that its 2014 annual meeting be held in New England.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide these comments to the agency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Read". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right and then curves downwards to form a triangle.

Andrew J. Read
Chair, Atlantic Scientific Review Group

cc: Shannon Bettridge Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries