Revised 12/30/2020

KILLER WHALE (*Orcinus orca*): AT1 Transient Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Killer whales have been observed in all oceans and seas of the world (Leatherwood and Dahlheim 1978). Although reported from tropical and offshore waters, killer whales occur at higher densities in colder and more productive waters of both hemispheres, with the greatest densities found at high latitudes (Mitchell 1975, Leatherwood and Dahlheim 1978, Forney and Wade 2006). Killer whales are found throughout the North Pacific Ocean. Along the west coast of North America, seasonal and year-round occurrence of killer whales has been noted along the entire Alaska coast (Braham and Dahlheim 1982), in British Columbia and Washington inland waterways (Bigg et al. 1990), and along the outer coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California (Green et al. 1992; Barlow 1995, 1997; Forney et al. 1995). Killer whales from these areas have been labeled as "resident," "transient," and "offshore" type killer whales (Bigg et al. 1990, Ford et al. 2000, Dahlheim et al. 2008) based on aspects of morphology, ecology, genetics, and behavior (Ford and Fisher 1982; Baird and Stacey 1988; Baird et al. 1992; Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000; Dahlheim et al. 2008). Through examination of photographs of recognizable individuals and pods, movements of whales between geographical areas have been documented. For example, whales identified in Prince William Sound have been observed near Kodiak Island (Matkin et al. 1999) and whales identified in Southeast Alaska have been observed in Prince William Sound, British Columbia, and Puget Sound (Leatherwood et al. 1990, Dahlheim et al. 1997). Movements of killer whales between the waters of Southeast Alaska and central California have also been documented (Goley and Straley 1994, Black et al. 1997, Dahlheim and White 2010).

Figure 1. Approximate distribution of transient killer whales in the eastern North Pacific (shaded areas). The distribution of resident and transient killer whale stocks in the eastern North Pacific largely overlap (see text). The U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone is delineated by a black line.

Several studies provide evidence that the resident, offshore, and transient ecotypes are genetically distinct in both mtDNA and nuclear DNA (Hoelzel and Dover 1991; Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000). Genetic differences have also been found between populations within the transient and resident ecotypes (Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000). A global genetic study of killer whales using the entire mitochondrial genome found that some killer whale ecotypes represent deeply divergent evolutionary lineages and warrant elevation to species or subspecies status (Morin et al. 2010). In particular, estimates from mitogenome sequence data indicate that transient killer whales diverged from all other killer whale lineages approximately 700,000 years ago. In light of these differences, the Society for Marine Mammalogy's Committee on Taxonomy currently recognizes the resident and transient North Pacific ecotypes as un-named *Orcinus orca* subspecies (Committee on Taxonomy 2019). In recognition of its status as an un-named subspecies or species, some researchers now refer to transient-type killer whales as Bigg's killer whales (e.g., Ford 2011, Riesch et al. 2012), in tribute to the late Dr. Michael Bigg.

The first studies of transient killer whales in Alaska were conducted in Southeast Alaska and in the Gulf of Alaska (from Prince William Sound, through the Kenai Fjords, and around Kodiak Island). In the Gulf of Alaska, Matkin et al. (1999) described two genetically distinct populations of transients which were never found in association with one another, the so-called "Gulf of Alaska" transients and "AT1" transients. In the past, neither of these populations were known to associate with the population of transient killer whales that ranged from California to Southeast Alaska, which are described as the West Coast Transient stock. Gulf of Alaska transients are documented throughout the Gulf of Alaska, including occasional sightings in Prince William Sound. AT1 transients have been seen only in Prince William Sound and in the Kenai Fjords region, and are therefore partially sympatric

with Gulf of Alaska transients. In addition, 14 out of 217 transients on the outer coast of Southeast Alaska and British Columbia were identified as Gulf of Alaska transients and in one encounter they were observed mixing with West Coast transients (Matkin et al. 2012, Ford et al. 2013). Transients within the Gulf of Alaska population have been found to have two mtDNA haplotypes, neither of which is found in the West Coast or AT1 populations. Members of the AT1 population share a single mtDNA haplotype. Transient killer whales from the West Coast population have been found to share a single mtDNA haplotype that is not found in the other populations. Additionally, all three populations have been found to have significant differences in nuclear (microsatellite) DNA (Barrett-Lennard 2000). Acoustic differences have been found as well; Saulitis et al. (2005) described acoustic differences between Gulf of Alaska transients and AT1 transients. For these reasons, the Gulf of Alaska transients are considered part of a population that is discrete from the AT1 population, and both of these populations are considered discrete from the West Coast transients.

Transient-type killer whales from the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea are currently considered to be part of a single population that includes Gulf of Alaska transients; however, recent genetic analyses suggest substructure within the region. Biopsy samples from the eastern Aleutians and the south side of the west end of the Alaska Peninsula have produced the same haplotypes as killer whales in the northern Gulf of Alaska; however, nuclear DNA analysis strongly suggests they belong to a separate population (Parsons et al. 2013). The geographic distribution of mtDNA haplotypes revealed samples from the central Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea with haplotypes not found in Gulf of Alaska transients, suggesting additional population structure in western Alaska. Killer whales observed in the northern Bering Sea and north and east to the western Beaufort Sea have characteristics of transient-type whales, but little is known about these whales (Braham and Dahlheim 1982, George and Suydam 1998). AT1 haplotype whales are also present west of the Aleutian Islands and into the Bering Sea; however, nuclear DNA analysis indicates these animals are not part of the AT1 transient population in the Gulf of Alaska (Parsons et al. 2013).

In summary, within the transient ecotype, association data (Ford et al. 1994, Ford and Ellis 1999, Matkin et al. 1999), acoustic data (Ford and Ellis 1999, Saulitis et al. 2005), and genetic data (Hoelzel et al. 1998, 2002; Barrett-Lennard 2000) confirm that at least three communities of transient whales exist and represent three discrete populations: 1) Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea transients, 2) AT1 transients, and 3) West Coast transients.

Based on data regarding association patterns, acoustics, movements, and genetic differences, eight killer whale stocks are now recognized within the Pacific U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone: 1) the Alaska Resident stock - occurring from Southeast Alaska to the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, 2) the Northern Resident stock - occurring from Washington State through part of Southeast Alaska, 3) the Southern Resident stock - occurring mainly within the inland waters of Washington State and southern British Columbia, but also in coastal waters from Southeast Alaska through California, 4) the Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea Transient stock - occurring mainly from Prince William Sound through the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, 5) the AT1 Transient stock - occurring in Alaska from Prince William Sound through the Kenai Fjords (Fig. 1), 6) the West Coast Transient stock - occurring from California through Southeast Alaska, 7) the Offshore stock - occurring from California through Alaska, and 8) the Hawaiian stock. Transient killer whales in Canadian waters are considered part of the West Coast Transient stock. The Hawaiian and Offshore stocks are reported in the Stock Assessment Reports for the U.S. Pacific Region.

AT1 killer whales were first identified as a separate, cohesive group in 1984, when 22 transient-type whales were documented in Prince William Sound (Leatherwood et al. 1984, Heise et al. 1991), although individual whales from the group had been photographed as early as 1978 (von Ziegesar et al. 1986). Once the North Gulf Oceanic Society (NGOS) began consistent annual research effort in Prince William Sound, AT1 killer whales were resighted frequently. In fact, AT1 killer whales were found to be some of the most frequently sighted killer whales in Prince William Sound (Matkin et al. 1993, 1994, 1999). Gulf of Alaska transients are seen less frequently in Prince William Sound, with periods of several years or more between resightings.

AT1 killer whales have never been seen in association with sympatric resident killer whale pods or with Gulf of Alaska transients (Matkin et al. 1999, 2012) and appear to have a more limited range than other transients. Their approximately 200-mile known range includes only Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords and adjacent offshore waters (Matkin et al. 1999, 2012).

POPULATION SIZE

Using photographic-identification, all 22 individuals in the AT1 Transient population were censused for the first time in 1984 (Leatherwood et al. 1984). All 22 AT1 killer whales were seen annually or biannually from 1984 to 1988 (Matkin et al. 1999, 2003). The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill occurred in spring of 1989. Nine individuals from

the AT1 group have been missing since 1990 (last seen in 1989), and two have been missing since 1992 (last seen in 1990 and 1991). Three of the missing AT1 killer whales (AT5, AT7, and AT8) were seen near the leaking *Exxon Valdez* shortly after the spill (Matkin et al. 1993, 1994, 2008). Two whales were found dead, stranded in 1989 and 1990, both genetically assigned to the AT1 population and one visually recognized as AT19, one of the missing nine whales (Matkin et al. 1994, 2008; Heise et al. 2003). The second unidentified whale was most likely one of the other missing AT1 whales. Additional mortalities of four older males include whales AT1 found stranded in 2000, AT13 and AT17 missing in 2002 (one of which was thought to be the carcass from the AT1 population that was found in 2002), and AT14 missing in 2003. A stranded whale found in 2003, genetically assigned to the AT1 population, was probably AT14 but could also have been AT13 (Matkin et al. 2008). No births have occurred in this population since 1984 and none of the missing whales have been seen since 2003 and are presumed dead. There is an extremely small probability (0.4%) that AT1 killer whales that are missing for 3 years or more are still alive (Matkin et al. 2008). No AT1 killer whale missing for at least 4 years has ever been resighted, and all 15 missing whales are presumed dead (Matkin et al. 2008). In 2019, photographs of the seven remaining AT1 killer whales were confirmed by researchers from the NGOS (http://www.whalesalaska.org, accessed December 2020); birth year is estimated for whales born before 1983, as described in Matkin et al. (1999): AT2 (female, born $\leq$1969), AT3 (male, born 1984), AT4 (female, born $\leq$1974), AT6 (male, born 1976), AT9 (female, born $\leq$1965), AT10 (male, born 1980), and AT18 (female, born $\leq$1974). Therefore, the population estimate as of the summer of 2019 remains at seven whales (NGOS; C. Matkin, NGOS, pers. comm., 17 October 2019). There has been no recruitment in this population since 1984 (Matkin et al. 2012).

Minimum Population Estimate

The abundance estimate of killer whales is a direct count of individually identifiable animals. Only 11 whales were seen between 1990 and 1999. Since then, four of those whales have not been seen for four or more consecutive years, so the minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) is seven whales (Matkin et al. 2008; NGOS; C. Matkin, NGOS, pers. comm., 17 October 2019). Fourteen years of annual effort have failed to discover any whales that had not been seen previously, so there is no reason to believe there are additional whales in the population. Therefore, this N_{MIN} is the total population size.

Current Population Trend

The population counts have declined from a level of 22 whales in 1989 to the 7 whales that have been resighted since 2003, a decline of 68%. Most of the mortality apparently occurred in 1989 and 1990.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) is not available for the AT1 Transient stock of killer whales. Between 2012 and 2018, Towers et al. (2019) observed a mean annual growth rate of 4.1% for a population subset of transient killer whales in Canadian coastal waters, which was higher than the mean annual growth rate of 2.7% documented by Ford et al. (2013) between 2006 and 2011 for a subpopulation of inner-coast transient killer whales that contained most of the same individuals. The current net productivity rate for the AT1 Transient stock of killer whales is 0, given that there has been no recruitment into the stock since 1984. Until additional stock-specific data become available, the default cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate of 4% will be used for this stock (NMFS 2016).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal (PBR) is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock is 0.1, as the stock is considered depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and there has been no recruitment into the stock since 1984. Thus, for the AT1 Transient killer whale stock, PBR is 0.01 whales ($7 \times 0.02 \times 0.1$).

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Information for each human-caused mortality, serious injury, and non-serious injury reported for NMFS-managed Alaska marine mammals between 2014 and 2018 is listed, by marine mammal stock, in Young et al. (2020); however, only the mortality and serious injury data are included in the Stock Assessment Reports. No human-caused mortality or serious injury of AT1 Transient killer whales was reported between 2014 and 2018. Potential threats most likely to result in direct human-caused mortality or serious injury of this stock include ship

strikes and oil spills (most of the mortality in this stock occurred in 1989 and 1990, following the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill).

Fisheries Information

Information for federally-managed and state-managed U.S. commercial fisheries in Alaska waters is available in Appendix 3 of the Alaska Stock Assessment Reports (observer coverage) and in the NMFS List of Fisheries (LOF) and the fact sheets linked to fishery names in the LOF (observer coverage and reported incidental takes of marine mammals: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-protection-act-list-fisheries, accessed December 2020).

The known range of the AT1 Transient stock is limited to waters of Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords. There are no federally-managed commercial fisheries in this area. Incidental mortality or serious injury of AT1 killer whales has not been reported in state-managed commercial fisheries which operate within the range of this stock, such as the Prince William Sound salmon set and drift gillnet fisheries and various herring fisheries, or in several subsistence fisheries (salmon, halibut, non-salmon finfish, and shellfish) which also occur within this area; however, the state-managed fisheries are not observed or have not been observed in a long time. Transient killer whales have entangled in pot fishery gear in other areas (Young et al. 2020) and entanglement in this type of gear may be a risk for the AT1 Transient stock of killer whales.

Alaska Native Subsistence/Harvest Information

Killer whales are not harvested for subsistence in Alaska.

Other Mortality

Collisions with vessels are an occasional source of mortality or serious injury of killer whales. For example, a killer whale struck the propeller of a vessel in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands flatfish trawl fishery in 2016 (Young et al. 2020); however, this mortality did not involve a whale from the AT1 Transient stock. There has been no known mortality or serious injury of AT1 killer whales due to vessel collisions. Most of the mortality occurred from 1989 to 1990 following the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

STATUS OF STOCK

The AT1 Transient stock of killer whales is below its Optimum Sustainable Population (OSP) and designated as depleted under the MMPA (69 FR 31321, 3 June 2004); therefore, it is classified as a strategic stock. The AT1 Transient stock is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Based on currently available data, the minimum estimated mean annual mortality and serious injury rate due to U.S. commercial fisheries (0) does not exceed 10% of the PBR (10% of PBR = 0.001) and, therefore, can be considered insignificant and approaching a zero mortality and serious injury rate. At least 11 animals were alive in 1998, but it appears that only 7 individuals remain alive. The AT1 killer whale group has been reduced to 32% (7/22) of its 1984 level. Since no births have occurred in the past 30 years, it is unlikely that this stock will recover.

There are few uncertainties in the assessment of the AT1 Transient stock of killer whales. Individual whales can be counted annually and the stock has been declining slowly since a dramatic reduction in the stock occurred immediately after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. PBR is designed to allow stocks to recover to, or remain above, the maximum net productivity level (MNPL) (Wade 1998). An underlying assumption in the application of the PBR equation is that marine mammal stocks exhibit certain dynamics. Specifically, it is assumed that a depleted stock will naturally grow toward OSP and that some surplus growth could be removed while still allowing recovery. However, the AT1 Transient killer whale population is at a very small population size, and small populations can have different dynamics than larger populations from Allee effects and stochastic dynamics. Although there is currently no known direct human-caused mortality or serious injury, given the small number of animals in the population, any human-caused mortality or serious injury is likely to have a serious population-level impact.

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