



Blue Whale

Blue whales are protected under both the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Modern whaling severely depleted the world's stocks, decreasing blue whale populations to only a small fraction of what they were assumed to be in the early 20th century. Blue whales were given complete protection in the North Atlantic in 1955 under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling; although Iceland did not recognize their protected status until 1960 (Sigurjónsson 1988).

Blue whales undertake a seasonal north/south migration. During the summer, they are found on feeding grounds in the high latitudes and, in the winter, they head to lower latitudes where they most likely breed or calve. In the western North Atlantic, blue whales range from the Arctic to the mid-latitudes with only occasional sightings in the U.S. Atlantic EEZ in the late summer (CeTAP 1982; Wenzel et al. 1988). This species has been reported off Florida and in the Gulf of Mexico although their distribution in southern waters remains largely unknown (Yochem and Leatherwood 1985). The U.S. Navy has acoustically tracked blue whales through much of the North Atlantic including the subtropical waters north of the West Indies and in deep-water east of the U.S. EEZ (Clark 1995). This acoustic work suggests that individual may range over the entire ocean basin leading some to speculate that they form a single population that breeds at random (NMFS 1998).

Blue whales are the largest of the cetaceans reaching lengths of over 80 feet (25 m) in the North Atlantic. Females give birth approximately every 2-3 years bearing a single calf. A long-lived species, they are thought to attain sexual maturity between 5 and 15 years of age (Mizroch et al. 1984; Yochem and Leatherwood 1985). Their diet consists primarily of krill.

Little is known about the population size of blue whales. Mitchell (1974) estimated that the entire western North Atlantic population numbered in the low hundreds during the late 1960's and 1970's. Currently, there are insufficient data to determine population trends for this species.

Though commercial whaling has had a severe effect on the status of blue whales worldwide, the western North Atlantic population has not been subjected to legal hunting since the 1960's. Today, potential threats are more likely to occur from collisions with vessels, entanglement in fishing gear and habitat degradation in the forms of both noise and chemical pollution. Currently, there are no confirmed records of mortalities or

serious injuries from fishery interactions occurring in the U.S. Atlantic EEZ. It is unclear as to whether blue whales are just less prone to becoming entangled or, if their large size allows them to break through nets or carry gear away with them. If the latter is the case, there may be undiscovered mortalities resulting from gear-related injuries. This is a strategic stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act because the blue whale is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. A recovery plan for blue whales was published in 1998 (NMFS 1998).

Photo credit: NOAA

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