

Snapshot of MMS Research on Cetaceans and Anthropogenic Presence

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Abstract

Initially, the Environmental Studies Program (ESP) addressed broad, general information needed to assess OCS activity compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act; that is, baseline studies or surveys. However, more specific information needs pertaining to those species given protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) began to develop. In the early ESP years, many baseline studies/surveys of protected and endangered species were conducted to develop an understanding of populations, abundance and distributions, and preferred areas for feeding, breeding and birthing. These studies helped address issues pertaining to space conflict and multiple use. Concurrent with this baseline work, research needs associated with the "potential" effects of oil and gas and marine minerals activities began to evolve. These later concerns surrounded potential impacts from sources other than oil spills and drilling discharges, such as noise and disturbance. By the mid-1980's, studies on the effects of noise on marine mammals were initiated in our Alaska and Pacific OCS Regions. In 1987, MMS sponsored a comprehensive literature review of the effects of noise, particularly focusing on the oil and gas industries. In 1992, the Office of Naval Research (ONR) provided core funding to convert this MMS report into an expanded publication: "Marine Mammals and Noise" published by Academic Press (1995).

Featured in the poster are two MMS studies which address the issues of anthropogenic presence, noise and endangered whales. The "Bowhead Whale Aerial Survey Project" is a 20 plus year effort to understand the bowhead migration and potential impacts from anthropogenic presence. The other featured study is the "Sperm Whale Seismic Survey" a multi-phased effort to get snapshot and broad views of the presence and use by sperm whales of the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico - areas of exploratory oil and gas activities.