MMC Annual Meeting 2019

Session Summary - Island Odontocetes

Robin Baird (Research Biologist, Cascadia Research Collective, and Scientific Advisor to the Commission) presented background information on fisheries interactions between nearshore hook-and-line fisheries and the island associated (insular) populations of several species of odontocetes (dolphins and toothed whales; e.g., pantropical spotted, rough-toothed dolphins and spinner dolphins, pygmy killer whales, and the endangered insular false killer). Because the nearshore hook-and-line fisheries (e.g., trolling, shortline and handline) are not monitored by the State of Hawai'i, there is mostly indirect evidence of interactions. Fishermen have reported interactions (e.g., rough-toothed dolphins), gear has been found on carcasses recovered onshore (e.g., insular false killer whales) and seen on live dolphins (several species) at sea. Extensive observations by Robin and his research colleagues have documented injuries and scars on several species (e.g., on 23% of pelagic false killer and 43% of pygmy killer whales) that are consistent with line interactions. As with the pelagic false killer whales it is likely that most interactions occur when these odontocetes "make a mistake" while taking bait or catch from hooks. Dr. Baird presented the results of a co-occurrence analysis he conducted that suggests that greatest potential for interaction between nearshore hook-and-line fisheries and false killer whales occurs not where the greatest fishing effort occurs (off the Kona coast), but rather off the northern tip of the island of Hawai'i, and off the northern sides of Moloka'i and Maui. Fishermen off Kona commonly use spotted dolphins as a cue to the presence of their target species, and were documented trolling through and around groups of these dolphins for 30% of the encounters off Kona.

NMFS is developing a recovery plan for the endangered insular false killer whale population, which was laid out for the Commission by Krista Graham (Endangered Species Biologist, Protected Resources Division, Pacific Islands Regional Office, NMFS). The plan will contain an assessment of the status of the population, the recovery plan, and a detailed implementation plan, that is expected to be completed in the summer of 2020. Krista described several of the objectives of the recovery plan, including targets for the demographic stability of the population and removing threats to the population's viability, and the plan's recovery criteria and actions.

Finally, Darla White (Marine Protected Species Outreach Associate, Department of Land and Natural Resources, State of Hawai'i) told the Commission about DLNR's efforts to gather data on these interactions and its funding/research aimed at improving understanding of the threats facing insular false killer whales and for outreach/education of fishermen and the public. The Commission learned that the State requires commercial fishermen to submit, on an "honor system", reports that contain information on marine mammal depredation and bycatch events, but that there are no such reporting requirements for recreational fishermen.

The three speakers were then joined by two local fishermen (Kenton Geer and Capt. Jeff Rogers) for a panel discussion. They brought a wealth of experience and different perspectives to the session. Jeff pointed out that reporting of odontocete interactions by commercial fishermen is not highly accurate because few fishermen are able to identify the several different species that occur around the islands.

Kenton said that in his experience around the island of Hawai‘i that almost all odontocete interactions occur around FADs (fish attraction devices), and because most are illegal private FADs, little is recorded about where they are and how many of them exist. There was some discussion about whether it would be feasible to put observers on these commercial vessels. The fishermen argued that interactions were so rare off Kona that it would be a waste of money, but Robin pointed out that based on his research it might be feasible in areas with much higher potential for interactions (e.g., off the north end of Hawai‘i). Jeff also informed the Commission that interactions in the charter boat fleet were much more common in the past when they used live bait to catch pelagics, but now that they exclusively use artificial lures they are quite rare.