

Theme 5: Issues associated with increasing marine mammal stocks

Theme 5 focused on the statutory standards for identifying “recovered” stocks under the MMPA and the available options for managing those stocks. Since the enactment of the MMPA, several marine mammal stocks have increased in abundance to the point where they are considered by some to be “recovered.” The MMPA specifies that the primary objective of marine mammal management is to maintain the health and stability of the marine ecosystem and to obtain an optimum sustainable population for each stock. A number of issues need to be considered in addressing recovering populations, starting with whether or not there is general agreement that achieving an optimum sustainable population (OSP) should be the statutory metric for determining when a stock is considered recovered. Among other things, management agencies need to consider whether there truly is an over abundance of marine mammals or identified problems stem from unrealistic expectations about human access to fishery resources and marine mammal habitats. There also is a related need to consider and agree on what it means for a marine mammal stock to be a significant functioning element of the ecosystem. Addressing issues associated with growing marine mammal populations should begin with determining how to assess carrying capacity for different species and stocks, compiling a list of which populations are considered to be at or near OSP, and identifying the social and political barriers that arise when implementing measures under the MMPA to minimize conflicts between marine mammal and human activities.

In this session, Mike Runge from USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center discussed what OSP and carrying capacities are and how they should be determined. Perkins Coie’s Don Baur addressed the available management options under the MMPA, which generally require that a population be at OSP, and reviewed associated statutory provisions. Finally, Gordon Waring of NMFS’s Northeast Fisheries Science Center reported on the success of the MMPA in promoting reestablishment of gray seals in New England and the research needed to assess and resolve potential conflicts.