APPENDIX K Acoustic Ecology and Behavior of Minke Whales in the Hawaiian and Marianas Islands: Localization, abundance estimation and characterization of minke whale 'boings'

Thomas Norris[1], Stephen Martin[2], Len Thomas[3], Tina Yack[1,4], Julie N. Oswald[1], Eva-Marie Nosal[5], and Vincent Janik[3]

[1]Bio-Waves Inc. 517 Cornish Dr. Encinitas, CA 92024, U.S.A., thomas.f.norris@bio-waves.net

2 SPAWAR Systems Ctr. Pacific, San Diego, CA, U.S.A.

3 University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, Scotland KY16 9LZ, U.K.

[4]Southwest Fisheries Science Center, 3333 North Torrey Pines Ct. La Jolla, CA 92037-1023, U.S.A.

[5]SOEST, University of Hawaii, 2540 Dole Street, Holmes Hall 405, Honolulu, HI 96822, U.S.A.

1. Introduction

Balaenoptera acutorostrata (minke whale) is a small and elusive baleen whale that is rarely sighted in tropical waters of the North Pacific Ocean. During winter and spring, complex sounds called 'boings' are frequently detected around the Hawaiian Islands and other Pacific Islands regions (Thompson and Friedl 1982; Norris et al. 2009). Although boings were described over 45 years ago (Wenz 1964) they were not attributed to minke whales until very recently (Rankin and Barlow 2005). Sightings of *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* are uncommon in tropical and subtropical waters; however, boings are frequently detected around the Hawaiian Islands using seafloor hydrophones and from hydrophone arrays towed from research vessels. Even today, very little is known about acoustic behaviors and ecology of *Balaenoptera acutorostrata.* The long-term objective of this research effort is to improve our understanding of the acoustic ecology and behavior of *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* in their breeding habitat.

A primary goal of this study is to compare characteristics of boings recorded in the Hawaiian Islands (central North Pacific) to other regions in the central and western and North Pacific (e.g. the Northern Mariana Islands). These results will be used to elucidate stock identities and population characteristics for *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* in the Pacific Islands. Another goal is to estimate the local abundance of calling *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* for our main study sites off the Hawaiian Island of Kauai and around the Marianas Islands. Finally, we are collecting information which is being used to assess the calling rates of *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. This information is necessary to validate cue-counting methods that are being developed to estimate densities of *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* exclusively from their calls (Thomas et al. 2008; Marques et al. 2009; Martin et al. 2009).

2. Methods

To accomplish these objectives, we are using several types of passive acoustic methods to record and analyze data from vocalizing *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. We used an acoustically quiet, 25m motor-sailing vessel equipped with 2-6 element towed hydrophone arrays (effective bandwidth ~100Hz - 48kHz) to conduct localization experiments in 2009 and an acoustic-visual line-transect survey in 2010. Bioacousticians monitored and processed acoustic data in real-time throughout

on-effort periods using various software including Ishmael, PAMGUARD and WhaletrackII. In 2010, AN/SSQ-53F DIFAR sonobuoys were also used. Localizations of individual *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* were estimated using target-motion analysis techniques when possible.

Acoustic data were simultaneously recorded from the Barking Sands Underwater Range Expansion (BSURE) test site seafloor hydrophone array that is part of the Navy's Pacific Missile Range Facility (PMRF) off the West Coast of Kauai. This Navy test range encompasses a large (>2000km^2), deep-water area northwest of the island of Kauai and includes seventeen bottom-mounted hydrophones (effective bandwidth ~100Hz to 18kHz) that were used for this project. PMRF seafloor array data were post-processed using two localization methods:

1) Time-of-arrival (TOA) hyperbolic localization methods (manual and automated), and:
2) A propagation model-based time-of-arrival (PMTOA) localization method (automated).

For the first method, manual techniques were initially used to identify and associate boings from the same calling animal on multiple PMRF seafloor hydrophones. Once associations and accurate TOA's were obtained, 2-D localizations were performed using standard hyperbolic techniques. Sound speed profiles (SSP) were obtained from expendable bathythermographs (XBTs) deployed each day off of the research vessel. For the second method (PMTOA), the upper 760m of SSP was averaged from several XBT deployments, whereas for depths below 760m, SSP's were estimated from historical data.

In 2009, efforts were focused on obtaining localizations from the towed hydrophone array to compare with and validate those obtained from the BSURE seafloor array. In 2010, efforts were focused on conducting an acoustic-visual line-transect survey of the BSURE range for estimating abundance and comparison to the seafloor hydrophone array data-set.

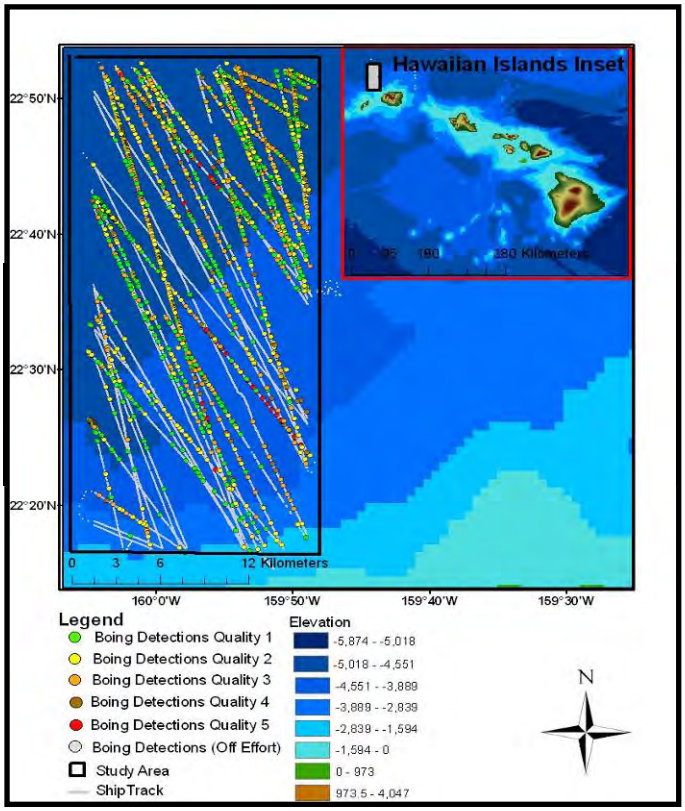
Finally, two additional sources of data were included in this study: 1) data collected using a bottom-mounted hydrophone located at the Station ALOHA Cabled Observatory (ACO) was analyzed to examine seasonal and diurnal variability, and 2) data from an acoustic-visual line-transect survey conducted in winter/spring 2006 for a large region surrounding the Mariana Islands that will be analyzed to derive abundance estimates and assess population structure from boing signal characteristics.

3. Results

We have completed two winter/spring field seasons (2009 and 2010) and are in the process of analyzing the acoustic data and developing automated analysis methods. In 2009, vessel based localization effort was conducted inside the BSURE area for 21 days between 15 March and 28 April and resulted in approximately 850km of survey effort. In 2010, line-transect surveys were conducted for 2.5 months from 12 March to 11 April, resulting in 13 days and over 1520km of line-transect effort. Over 260 hours of recordings were made for both field seasons.

In 2009, we obtained bearings for at least 777 boings that were manually detected using the towed array. Preliminary results from the just-completed 2010 field season indicate that at least 1598 boings were detected manually, of which 1198 bearings were obtained (Fig. 1). Over 50 localizations were made during the line-transect survey effort.

Automated detection and localization methods in PAMGUARD and Ishmael were attempted in real-time during 2010 surveys but were deemed too demanding on the available computer resources
so were discontinued after leg I. Therefore, the acoustic data is being post-processed using automated and semi-automated techniques. These methods are expected to yield more detections and possibly localizations. The results of the automated detections and localizations will be reviewed and validated manually to ensure their reliability. Localizations obtained from the towed hydrophone array data will be compared to localizations collected from the BSURE seafloor hydrophone array. These automated methods will be used to assess localization estimates of animals, track movements, and eventually to estimate the density and abundance of calling animals in the two main study areas using modified distance sampling analysis methods.



Assessment of localization accuracy is important to verify the assumptions of statistical methods being developed in a related effort called the Density Estimation of Cetaceans from passive Acoustic Fixed sensors (DECAF) to estimate densities of calling animals from fixed hydrophones (Thomas et al. 2008). A case study was conducted from the BSURE seafloor hydrophone dataset containing over 6,000 boings automatically detected over a 6 hour period in late April 2009. Comparisons of localizations from the two seafloor array methods described above indicated good agreement (mean diff. = 142.7m; range: 67-280m). Researchers on the survey vessel were able to acoustically detect, track and sight the same individual that was being tracked from the seafloor array. The position of the sighted animal indicated relatively good accuracy (within a few hundred meters) of the positions obtained using the two seafloor localization techniques described earlier. Interestingly, the localizations determined from the towed array, although relatively precise, indicated biases based on the different algorithms used to plot the bearings from the towed hydrophone array to the calling animal. These errors were investigated further by manually plotting data. Results indicated that uncertainties in the true heading of the towed array can significantly affect localization error.

Based on the results of this case study, more fully automated techniques are being developed to facilitate the localization analysis. In addition, improvements were made to existing Matlab-based detectors used to detect boings for the automated localization algorithm. These automated methods were used to reduce processing time during the 2010 field effort.

One year of data collected at the ACO were analyzed (February 2007 – February 2008). These data showed that boings occurred seasonally from October to May with little diurnal variation.

4. Discussion

Analyses of minke whale boings are underway to identify signal characteristics that might be useful for individual identification and as indicators of population structure. We have already found statistically significant differences in the pulse repetition rates of boings from Hawaiian waters compared with those recorded in the Mariana Islands in the Western North Pacific. Interestingly, preliminary results from analysis of boings recorded on the seafloor hydrophone array (work conducted by S. Martin) indicate that there may be reliable signal characteristics that can be used for individual recognition. If so, these signal characteristics can be used to identify and track individuals using passive acoustic methods. We are continuing to analyze data from both Hawaii field seasons and the Marianas effort. Our immediate efforts are focused on obtaining density estimates for our two main study areas. We are also examining the effects of noise produced by our own vessel on the calling rates and acoustic behavior patterns of minke whales. Any effects of vessel noise on calling rates is important to assess in order to evaluate biases in these data caused by our survey vessel, and future vessel based surveys. The results of these investigations will provide important information about a species that is common in the subtropical waters of the North Pacific Ocean, but about which there is little information regarding their ecology and behavior. [Work funded by ONR Marine Mammal Program / ACO access provided by Dr. **D***uennebier]*

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