



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE



Protected Resources Division
Southwest Fisheries Science
Center
NOAA Fisheries
Contact: Lisa T. Ballance
(Lisa.Ballance@noaa.gov)

Eastern Tropical Pacific Cetacean and Ecosystem Assessment Cruises: Mandates and Research Overview

Mandates

The NOAA Fisheries Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC) is responsible for monitoring and conducting research on dolphins incidentally taken in the eastern tropical Pacific purse-seine fishery for tuna. This research is mandated domestically by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and it provides critical support to the Agreement on the International Dolphin Conservation Program.

Section 304 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act requires that NOAA Fisheries undertake research “projects to carry out stock assessments for those marine mammal species and stocks taken in the purse seine fishery for yellowfin tuna in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean, including species or stocks not within waters under the jurisdiction of the United States.” Research cruises provide the data needed to carry out these stock assessments. Failure to conduct monitoring cruises would result in failure to meet this Congressional mandate.

These research cruises also support the US delegation to the Agreement on the International Dolphin Conservation Program (AIDCP), a binding international agreement to which the United States is a signatory. A primary goal of the AIDCP is to reduce dolphin mortality in the fishery and ensure the long-term sustainability of these stocks. The United States, and specifically NOAA Fisheries SWFSC, is the only entity that provides dolphin monitoring and research results to the AIDCP Parties. The information provided by the United States forms the basis for management measures taken by the Parties, including setting annual dolphin mortality limits and establishing independent observer program requirements; the AIDCP observer program monitors dolphin mortalities and provides certification as to whether tuna meet “dolphin-safe” labeling standards. Without the research cruises conducted by the SWFSC the AIDCP Parties would have no information as to whether current management measures are effective or whether new measures are needed. Furthermore, future management decisions would be based on outdated information. Ultimately, if unable to provide this information, the US delegation would fail to meet its obligations to the other AIDCP Parties and the Secretariat, jeopardizing our future participation in this Agreement.

Research Overview

The Protected Resources Division, SWFSC, NOAA Fisheries, has been conducting dolphin assessment cruises in the eastern tropical Pacific since the 1970s. The primary objective has been to assess trends in abundance of dolphin stocks incidentally killed in the yellowfin tuna purse-seine fishery. Since 1986, these cruises have taken a multidisciplinary approach with a goal of characterizing the ecosystem of which these dolphins are a part (in order to separate fishery from non-fishery effects on dolphin populations). Research has also focused on stock structure, morphology, life history parameters, acoustics, and behavior of the affected dolphins (and other cetaceans in the ecosystem). A five-year series of cruises was conducted during 1986-1990 (known as MOPS - Monitoring of Porpoise Stocks) and a three-year series was completed during 1998-2000 (known as STAR – *Stenella* Abundance Research). Since 2000, STAR cruises have been conducted at three- to four-year intervals, in 2003 and 2006, with the next cruise scheduled for 2010.

