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Central and Arctic Region

Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat
Science Advisory Report 2015/006

SUSTAINABILITY OF A FLEXIBLE SYSTEM OF TOTAL ALLOWABLE ANNUAL CATCHES OF NARWHALS (*Monodon monoceros*)

Narwhal (Monodon monoceros) by R. Phillips.

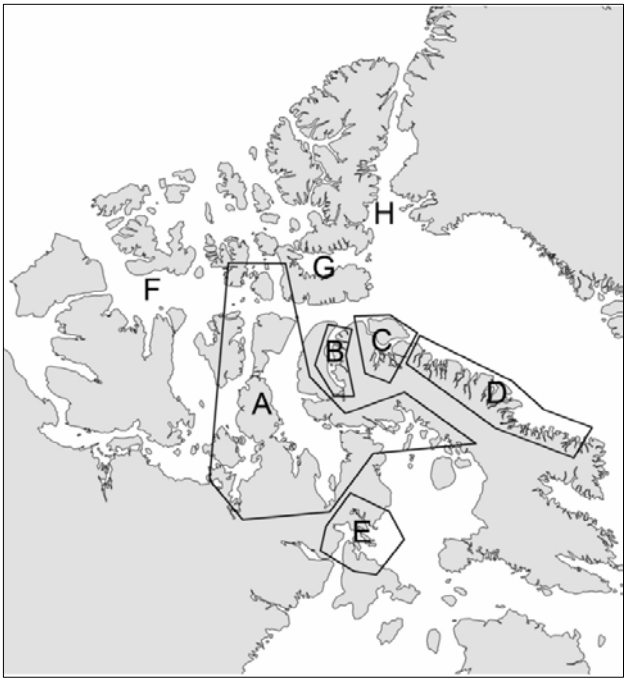

Figure 1. Approximate areas where Canadian summering aggregations of narwhals occur: A - Somerset Island, B - Admiralty Inlet, C - Eclipse Sound, D - East Baffin Island, E - Northern Hudson Bay. Other areas where narwhals are known to occur in summer: F - Parry Islands, G - Jones Sound, H - Smith Sound) [adapted from DFO 2011].

Context

There are presently five recognized narwhal summering stocks in the Canadian Arctic: Somerset Island, Admiralty Inlet, Eclipse Sound, East Baffin Island, and Northern Hudson Bay (Fig.1 A-D). Hunts on these narwhal stocks are managed by setting an annual Total Allowable Landed Catch (TALC) for each stock for a five-year period. The TALC is based on a Potential Biological Removal (PBR) estimate calculated for each stock, minus estimated hunting losses (i.e., struck and lost). The present analysis is in response to requests by Resource Management (RM) for peer reviewed science to address the questions of sustainability of a flexible TALC system for narwhals. There are also narwhals summering in Jones Sound, Smith Sound and the Parry Islands water (Fig. 1 F-H). Their stock definition and status is uncertain but advice given here would apply once assessments allow the setting of total allowable land catch limits.

SUMMARY

- There is a desire on the part of Inuit to have a "flexible quota system" management provision implemented in narwhal hunts, similar to what was employed under Community Based Management (CBM) of narwhal in Nunavut, i.e., to carry-over (credit) unused Total Allowable Landed Catch (TALC) for use in the subsequent hunting season or to borrow (debit) from the following years' TALC for use in the current hunting season
- Results of a deterministic model to investigate the robustness of a flexible TALC system clearly indicate that, for the scenarios investigated, such a management approach is sustainable, as long as the total hunting mortality over the five year period does not exceed five times the annual PBR.
- Key assumptions of the deterministic model are:
    a. birth and death rates are constant,
    b. PBR is updated every ten years with new abundance estimates,
    c. Hunting loss is a constant fraction of TALC, and
    d. flexible hunting limits are adhered to by all and landed catches are reported exactly (i.e., no implementation errors).
- Process error model results, which account for some variability of birth and death rates, showed a greater risk of the population becoming depleted under certain credit or debit scenarios but the risk was similar to the base scenario run for comparison where no debit or credit was applied.
- Better estimates of hunting loss rates would increase confidence in model results. These model results do not account for impacts of large ice entrapment mortality. These are rare events and have been the subject of previous science advice. A more detailed assessment of population trend would be warranted were there evidence of deterministic environmental effects on narwhal birth and death processes.

INTRODUCTION

There are presently five recognized narwhal summering stocks in the Canadian Arctic: Somerset Island, Admiralty Inlet, Eclipse Sound, East Baffin Island, and Northern Hudson Bay. Hunts on these narwhal stocks are managed by setting an annual Total Allowable Landed Catch (TALC) for each stock that remains constant for a five-year period. The TALC is based on a Potential Biological Removal (PBR) estimate calculated for each stock, minus estimated hunting losses. The present analysis is in response to requests by Resource Management (RM) for peer reviewed science to address the questions of sustainability of a flexible TALC system for narwhals.

Question 1: Is it sustainable if Arctic Bay and Pond Inlet exchange their unused spring and fall Marine Mammal Tags for use by either community during their migratory (spring/fall) narwhal hunts? The same question was also posed for Clyde River and Qikiqtarjuaq.

Question 2: Harvest credit (or carry-over) in a five year period:

a. Is 100% carry-over for one year sustainable?
b. What % carry-over for one year is sustainable?
c. What % cumulative carry-over is sustainable over consecutive years (up to five years)?

Question 3: Harvest debit (or borrow-back) in a five year period:

a. Is 100% borrowing from the following year sustainable once in a five year period?

b. What % borrowing from the following year is sustainable?

c. Can the total five consecutive years' total allowable catch be allocated to each year, in a five year period, any way the hunters choose as long as the sum of the five-years of catch does not exceed that total?

Question 4: How sustainable would a hunting mortality of five times the total allowable catch if applied to any one year of a five year period?

ASSESSMENT

Question 1: This question was addressed by previous science advice (Richard 2011). In short, the two communities in question,

a. Arctic Bay and Pond Inlet, or

b. Clyde River and Qikiqtarjuaq, are hunting from the mixed stocks in spring and fall and therefore are taking from the same stocks' TALCs.

Consequently, the harvest credits are transferable between Arctic Bay and Pond Inlet, or between Clyde River and Qikiqtarjuaq without invalidating previous advice on the sustainability of the affected stocks.

The remaining four questions required new analyses. They were performed using a variant of the Wade (1998) PBR robustness trial method, where a proportion of the PBR for a stock was either carried over (credited) to the subsequent year to make-up for a low catch year or borrowed (debited) from the next year if a given year's catch was higher than the annual PBR. Several scenarios were modelled in deterministic projections for 100 years, as in Wade (1998), varying start populations from 5,000 to 15,000 and recovery factors from 0.5 to 1. The details of the simulations are given in Richard and Young (2015).

In all cases, more than 95% of projected populations reached sizes in excess of the Maximum Net Productivity Level. The results of these simulations of flexible catch limits did not depart much from the base models, where no credits or debits were exercised.

The same simulations were done with an added parameter for process error, i.e., a parameter simulating variation in population dynamics (Richard and Young 2015). This process error, arbitrarily set at 0.05, to reflect our belief that narwhals do not have highly variable population dynamics, resulted in more variable results for debit or credit scenarios than the deterministic runs, but none of scenario results were significantly worse than the results of base models without debits or credits.

These results indicate that a system of flexible Total Allowable Landed Catches is sustainable, as long as the total hunting mortality over each five-year period does not exceed five times the PBR for that period. The modelling results also show that the choice of a fixed recovery factor of 1 does not significantly increase the risk to sustainability of credit or debit scenarios.

Sources of Uncertainty

The above conclusions are based on models with some important assumptions. The first is that TALCs are a constant fraction of total hunting mortality, i.e., that hunting losses are constant and very similar to what was used to provide TALC advice for narwhal stocks (0.28 from Richard 2008). Hunting losses may in fact vary from area to area, from season to season and with different hunting methods. Unfortunately, we have insufficient data at present to determine

those variations and apply them in modelling. Nevertheless, the PBR method has been shown to be robust to under-estimates of actual hunt mortality (Wade 1998).

Second, we assume that sources of human-induced narwhal mortality other than total hunting mortality (landed catch and hunting loss) are negligible. We have no reason to believe otherwise at present.

Third, we assume that flexible hunting limits are adhered to by all and that landed catches are reported exactly, that there are no implementation errors. Presently, we know of no reason to believe that narwhal landed catches are not reported accurately, but there have been no independent studies to verify this assumption. Perhaps this concern is moot as the latest records of narwhal catches (DFO) indicate that landed catches are, in many cases, lower than TALCs.

The models do not take into account the impact of rare ice-entrapment mortality, nor do they include environmental effects that might negatively impact birth and death processes in narwhal populations. Large ice entrapments are rare but can have a significant short-term impact on population trend. Science advice on one such entrapment event can be found in DFO (2012). Environmental impacts on birth and death processes in narwhal populations are unknown at present but, should there be evidence of long-term negative effects, more detailed narwhal population assessments would be needed.

CONCLUSIONS

These results are encouraging for the implementation of flexible TALCs, as they show little additional risk to the narwhal stocks from implementation of flexible TALCs. If a flexible TALC system is implemented, the five-year total landed catch should not exceed five times the annual TALC for each stock.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

This Science Advisory Report is from the October 20-24, 2014 Annual Meeting of the National Marine Mammal Peer Review Committee (NMMPRC). Additional publications from this meeting will be posted on the Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) Science Advisory Schedule as they become available.

DFO. 2011. Advice regarding the genetic structure of Canadian narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*). DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Sci. Advis. Rep. 2011/021.

DFO. 2012. Effect of 2008 ice entrapment on the Eclipse Sound narwhal total allowable landed catch. DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Sci. Resp. 2012/020.

Richard, P.R. 2008. On determining the Total Allowable Catch for Nunavut odontocete stocks. DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Res. Doc. 2008/022: iv + 12 p. (Erratum September 2008).

Richard, P.R. 2011. Allocation model for landed catches from Baffin Bay narwhal stocks. DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Res. Doc. 2011/056: iv + 27 p. (Erratum December 2011)

Richard, P.R., and Young, R. 2015. Evaluation of the sustainability of a flexible system of total allowable annual catches of narwhals (*Monodon monoceros*). DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Res. Doc. 2015/006. iv + 13 p.

Wade, P.R. 1998. Calculating limits to the allowable human-caused mortality of cetaceans and pinnipeds. Mar. Mamm. Sci. 14: 1-37.

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Centre for Science Advice (CSA)
Central and Arctic Region
Fisheries and Oceans Canada
501 University Crescent
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N6

Telephone: 204-983-5131
E-Mail: xcna-csa-cas@dfo-mpo.gc.ca
Internet address: www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas-sccs/

ISSN 1919-5087

Correct Citation for this Publication:

DFO. 2015. Sustainability of a flexible system of total allowable annual catches of narwhals (*Monodon monoceros*). DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Sci. Advis. Rep. 2015/006.

Aussi disponible en français :

*MPO. 2015. La durabilité d’un système de limites flexibles de captures de narvals (*Monodon monoceros*). Secr. can. de consult. sci. du MPO, Avis sci. 2014/006.*

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