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NOAA, BOEMRE and Fish and Wildlife Service Advance Nation's Largest Survey of Marine Protected Species

Study Covers U.S. East Coast Waters

WASHINGTON — The nation's largest survey of protected marine species is now underway for its second year along the East Coast, officials from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced today.

Aboard the NOAA ships Henry B. Bigelow and Gordon Gunter, researchers are documenting animals in deeper waters beyond the edge of the continental shelf, with the Bigelow off the northeastern U.S. and the Gunter off the southeastern U.S. During July and August, NOAA aircraft will carry observers surveying for animals in the shallower waters on the shelf all along the East Coast, and USFWS aircraft will survey for seabirds during August from Maine to Florida.

The expeditions are part of the Atlantic Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (AMAPPS), a joint multi-year study involving NOAA's Fisheries Service, BOEMRE and USFWS. Under an interagency agreement, NOAA and BOEMRE will assign scientists to this summer's and future expeditions and BOEMRE will provide \$7.6 million for the study, which runs from 2010 until 2014.

Comprehensive surveys of this type are rare, partly because it is difficult to collect the data. These surveys will allow scientists not only to better estimate the abundance of marine mammals, sea turtles, and sea birds in U.S. Atlantic waters, but also to investigate how the animals' distribution and abundance relate to the physical and biological ecosystem.

The study will help NOAA's Fisheries Service manage, conserve and protect living marine resources within the United States Exclusive Economic Zone, waters three to 200 miles offshore. The study also will help inform BOEMRE's decision-making process for future energy development. Finally, this partnership will give USFWS much better scientific information about seabird populations, so that the agency can more clearly define the needs of these species and make better management decisions.

The project will also test new remote sensing technologies that increasingly make it easier to gather data. Some of the technologies include underwater recorders that capture sounds animals make, pattern recognition software that helps scientists identify species by their outer markings, tags attached to animals that transmit information about their locations and ocean conditions when they surface, and underwater robots outfitted with a variety of sensors.

Researchers will also develop models and other tools to translate the survey data into estimates linked to time, space and habitat. Models using acoustics data are already in development, with first results expected in 2012. These tools will help to decide how best to use and protect the ocean. Eventually, the data will be incorporated into a comprehensive geospatial database and made available online to both public users and government agencies. For example, the U.S. Navy will be able to use these new data in support of its marine stewardship goals on its at-sea test and training ranges.

In addition to the surveys currently underway, AMAPPS research in 2011 has included harbor seal tagging this spring in Massachusetts and Maine, followed by an aerial seal survey along the New England coast during peak pupping season in late May and June. In addition, a loggerhead turtle-tagging and biological sampling cruise was just completed ahead of schedule this month aboard two

New Jersey commercial scallop vessels. Researchers put satellite tags on 25 juvenile loggerhead turtles, adding to the 44 tagged last year by scientists from both NOAA's Northeast and Southeast Fisheries Science Centers.

A report on the 2010 work was recently published by the NEFSC and can be found at:
http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/AMAPPS/docs/Final_2010AnnualReportAMAPPS_19Apr2011.pdf.

NOAA and the USFWS implement the Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); USFWS also implements the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The two agencies have collaborated to survey protected marine species in the Atlantic since 1979. NOAA's Fisheries Service also supports many state government agencies as well as private non-profit and academic research programs and projects to better understand marine species. BOEMRE's Environmental Studies Program conducts and sponsors scientific research to inform decision-making regarding ocean energy and marine minerals management, as authorized by the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, as amended, the Energy Policy Act of 2005, and NEPA.

Related Links:

NEFSC's Protected Species Branch: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/>

BOEMRE Environmental Studies Program: <http://www.boemre.gov/eppd/sciences/esp/index.htm>.

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