

Environmental Studies Program: Ongoing Studies

Study Area(s): Mid-Atlantic (Offshore Virginia)

Administered By: Cornell University

Title: Understanding Whale Presence in the Virginia Offshore Wind Energy Area Using Passive Acoustic Monitoring

BOEM Information Need(s) to be Addressed: The Federal waters off the coast of Virginia are of tremendous interest for offshore wind development and potential oil and gas exploration. However, there are few datasets in this area that provide for a long-term, complete seasonal understanding of the occurrence of marine protected species in these planning areas. Currently there is no sound source verification data for High Resolution Geophysical (HRG) equipment use in the Virginia Offshore Wind Energy Area (WEA). The existing data gaps present regulators and industry with risk due to potential conflicts with the Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. This study will assist in BOEM's fulfillment of its requirements to address these statutes.

Total Cost: (in thousands) \$1,500

Period of Performance: FY 2015-2018

Conducting Organization(s): Bioacoustics Research Program, Cornell University

BOEM Contact(s): Desray Reeb (Desray.Reeb@boem.gov)

Description:

Background: The coastal Mid-Atlantic waters are part of the home range or migratory corridor of several baleen whale species, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale (NARW). The seasonal usage of this area by different whale species is unclear; existing sources suggest that right whale occurrence around Virginia is limited to nearshore locations around the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay during winter months (December-March).

Results from a recent 1-year passive acoustic monitoring pilot study by Cornell University demonstrated year-round occurrence of NARWs within state and federal waters off of Virginia in June 2012- June 2013, a second year of data (June 2013-May 2014) will also become available. Right whales were not confined to nearshore waters, but occurred out to the edge of the outer continental shelf (OCS). Right whales also occurred throughout the year, with peak occurrence in February and March.

Other whale species (humpbacks, fin whales and minke whales), and potentially some fish species, were also acoustically detected, but their seasonal occurrence within Virginia waters was not analyzed. These new data suggest that NARWs and other whale species may be present in the energy exploration and development areas with greater frequency than previous studies indicate, and the current environmental mitigation for energy development may be improved with more complete information about the actual frequency and duration of protected species occurrence in these areas.

During the June 2012-June 2013 acoustic monitoring period, independent HRG surveys were conducted in the area. Analysis of all the acoustic data would provide the first empirical sound source verification data for HRG equipment in a WEA and further the clarification of the occurrence of various protected whale species in and around the Virginia WEA.

Objectives: This study will clarify when baleen whales (primarily NARW, humpback and fin whales) are occurring in the area, where, specifically, they are occurring, how much time the whales are spending in the area, their approximate numbers as they are moving through, and what the ambient noise environment is that they are exposed to. Analyze the existing data in order to obtain real-time, site specific sound source verification levels for HRG equipment.

Methods:

- Establish a multi-year record of baleen whale occurrence in the Virginia wind area lease blocks. It is difficult to assess whether the data collected from June 2012-June 2013 is part of a regular pattern of right whale movements, or represents an anomaly of right whale activity based on above average ocean temperatures.
- Determine spatial and temporal patterns of habitat usage of at least 3 baleen whale species in the area.
- Estimate density and abundance of at least 3 baleen whale species in this area.
- Collect baseline data on the ambient noise of these areas for use of environmental assessment of anthropogenic noise levels from either wind turbine construction or seismic surveys.
- Potentially provide the first empirical data on HRG sound source levels in the Virginia WEA.

Current Status: All scheduled field work has been accomplished for the project. The analysis for the presence of baleen whales for all data collected has been completed, while the ambient noise and species location analysis is still in progress.

The next three months will involve drafting the manuscripts and technical report, pulling together results from the species presence analysis, location analysis and ambient noise analysis. Potential additional analyses to incorporate environmental data and model potential impacts of wind energy activities to the study area will be explored.

Final Report Due: September 30, 2018

Publications Completed: None

Affiliated WWW Sites:

<https://marinecadastre.gov/epis/#/search/study/100085>

Revised Date: January 23, 2018