



21st Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals

13-18 DECEMBER 2015
HILTON SAN FRANCISCO UNION SQUARE
SAN FRANCISCO, CA USA

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Photo-identification and haulout counts of pinnipeds in Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island and Chesapeake Bay, Virginia

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Harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina concolor*) and gray seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) distribution along the U.S. Atlantic coast has shifted in recent years, with an increased number of seals reported in southern New England and the mid-Atlantic region (Kenney 2014; Waring et al. 2014). Data from NOAA surveys have previously shown New Jersey as the southern extent for harbor and gray seals (NOAA 2015a), with occasional sightings and strandings reported as far south as Florida and North Carolina for harbor and gray seals, respectively (Waring et al. 2014). NOAA now reports that a small group of harbor seals (<50) may haul out seasonally in the Chesapeake Bay (Waring et al. 2014), yet there are no published survey data for seals in Virginia (Waring et al. 2014). Since both Narragansett Bay and Chesapeake Bay are important for Navy activities; the Navy is committed to acquiring the best available scientific data for environmental planning, permit acquisition and impact analyses in these areas. To meet this goal, we are conducting regular, systematic counts following NOAA guidelines (NOAA 2015b) at known haul out sites to better understand seal occurrence, movement, and haulout patterns. Land-based observations including counts, behavior observations, potential disturbance and environmental conditions were made in both Rhode Island and Virginia during the 2014-2015 field season and will continue during the 2015-2016 season. Photo-identification methods are being employed with the WILD-ID software (Bolger 2012) to obtain current baseline data and will be compared or added to existing regional photo databases to examine movements throughout the southern New England and the mid-Atlantic region. Data collected will also be compared to existing sighting and stranding records for historical perspective. Data on the number and behavior of seals will allow for a more robust analysis in the Navy's assessment of potential impacts of Navy activities in these areas.

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