Other Proposals

A. PROPOSAL

Deletion of Mirounga angustirostris from Appendix II.

B. PROPONENT

The United States of America.

C. SUPPORTING STATEMENT

1. Taxonomy

11. Class: Mammalia

12. Order: Carnivora

13. Family: Phocidae

14. Species: Mirounga angustirostris (Gill, 1866)

15: Common Names:

English: northern elephant seal
French: éléphant de mer du nord
Spanish: elefante marino del norte

16. Code Numbers: 1413002008001001 (ISIS)

2. Biological Data

21. Distribution:

Past: Northern elephant seals historically occupied the Pacific Coast of North America. They bred from the Point Reyes Peninsula north of San Francisco Bay south to Cabo San Lazaro and Magdalena Bay, Baja California, Mexico (Scammon, 1874). Feeding areas for some population segments ranged from the tip of Baja California north to British Columbia, Canada, and sometimes southeast Alaska. Commercial sealing in the 19th century almost exterminated the species and extirpated rookeries on all but Isla de Guadelupe, Baja California Norte, by 1880 (Bartholomew and Hubbs, 1960). Since the 1930's, they began reoccupying their historic breeding range by establishing new rookeries or reestablishing former ones at sites to the north and south of Isla de Guadelupe.

Present: Northern elephant seals have reoccupied almost all their historic breeding range and now breed from Isla Natividad, Baja California, north to the Farallon Islands off San Francisco, California. Pelagically feeding animals sometimes reach southeast Alaska. Some 13 rookeries are known, two of these sites involve pupping on the mainland.

22. Population:Northern elephant seals were nearly exterminated by 1860 and maintained a very low number, possibly less than 100 seals, through most of the rest of the century (Bartholomew and Hubbs, 1960). Since the early 1900's, the species has been increasing steadily, most recently at a rate of 8.75 percent in the U.S. rookeries. The limited data available for estimation of population size and growth rate on Mexican rookeries suggest that recent growth has been slower than for the U.S. population. The present total northern elephant seal population probably numbers at least 85,000 animals. Factors limiting growth rate, dispersal, or ultimate carrying capacity are not sufficiently understood to predict when population growth may level off.

Ecology:Female northern elephant seals usually reproduce at the age of three or four, infrequently at age two (Bonnell - et al., 1980). Physical maturity is reached at six years. Females have one pup annually, usually in the same rookery, until death at around age 14. Males mature sexually at about age five, but do not successfully mate until age eight or nine. They are highly polygamous. Peak breeding success for males is achieved at age 10 or 11, and most die by age 14. Pupping and breeding space regulate population levels before food does.

23. Habitat:Preferred breeding ares are sandy beaches (Le Boeuf and Bonnell, 1980). Overcrowding and social interactions may cause young animals to pup on less preferred cobble beaches or to establish new rookeries on islands, or more recently, on mainland beaches. Decimation of mainland predators and protection from human harassment may allow further colonization of the mainland for pupping.

Feeding areas are dispersed pelagically from rookeries. Northern elephant seals migrate primarily northward from their breeding sites to Canada or even Alaska, but also to the south along Baja California (Condit and Le Boeuf, 1984). Adult males and juvenile males and females migrate long distances, but adult females may remain near their breeding sites. Elephant seals feed on numerous cephalopod species and several fish, shark, and skate species. They feed in deepwater; offshore areas, such as overshelf slopes, and attracts several together (Antonelis and Fiscus, 1980). Recent analysis of elephant seal interactions with commercial fisheries suggests a low mortality rate due to entanglement.

3. Trade Data

31. National Utilization: Northern elephant seal utilization is restricted to taking for scientific research, public display, and incidental take in commercial fisheries. Commercial trade in the United States has been prohibited since 1972.

32. Legal International Trade: Legal trading is restricted to trade under permit for scientific research, public display, or incidental to commercial fisheries. Since 1972, three elephant seals of U.S. origin have been exported to foreign display facilities. Since 1965, eight live specimens have been imported from Mexico. Scientific specimens involved in international trade are generally parts from animals found dead or tissue samples (blood, teeth, etc) drawn from animals which are left in the wild. Total trade figures for animals of Mexican origin are not available, but are assumed to be of a comparable level.

33. Illegal Trade: No illegal trade is known. Occasional individuals may be shot by fishermen in Mexican or U.S. waters.

34. Potential Trade Threats

341. Live Specimens: The number of live specimens in trade for scientific or display purposes is very low. Demand for live specimens will probably be filled by stranded animals that have been rehabilitated, but determined not fit for return to the wild.

342. Parts and Derivatives: No parts or products can legally be used. Trade in genitalia for presumed medicinal uses has not been reported since the 1920's, nor has there been any harvest for oil since the late 1800's or early 1900's (Bartholomew and Hubbs, 1960).

4. Protection Status

41. National: Northern elephant seals are protected from trade or disturbance except by permit under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and from illegal export by the Lacey Act. All breeding rookeries are under some level of governmental control. The species has been protected under Mexican federal jurisdiction since 1922.

42. International: Northern elephant seals have been listed in Appendix II of CITES since 1979 and were listed in Appendix I from 1975 until 1979.

43. Additional Protection Needs: Protection of rookeries from disturbances during breeding season, by controlling human access, is important to maintain pup survival and weaning rates. The remote nature of most rookeries and the governmental ownership or management over most of the islands seems to be sufficient to minimize disturbances. Continued monitoring of marine mammal fishery interactions is advised.

5. Information on Similar Species

This species is conspecific with and similar in appearance and behaviour to the southern elephant seal Mirounga leonina. This southern hemisphere species numbers some 600,000 animals. They are distributed in Argentina, sub-Antarctic, and Antarctic waters, with breeding rookeries on several temperate mainland and island beaches as well as several breeding colonies on the Antarctic Peninsula. A precipitous population decline is being studied in the Indian Ocean sector, but to date the case(s) has (have) not been identified. No commercial trade is known, and the last effort was curtailed at South Georgia Island in 1964. This species also recovered from severe decimation from sealing in the 1800's.

6. Comments from Countries of Origin

None received.

7. Additional Remarks

Protective measure enforced by both range states have allowed the dramatic and continued recovery of this species. The minuscule involvement of this species in international trade and absence of any domestic utilization does not warrant maintenance of this species in Appendix II of CITES. The greater percentage of any specimen's life is spent within 200 nautical miles of either Mexico, the United

States, or Canada, which maintain research programmes and monitor marine mammal/fishery interactions. Removal of this species from CITES Appendix II will not reduce current protection activities and research or hinder population growth.

8. References

Antonelis, G.A., Jr. and C.H. Fiscus.1980. The pinnipeds of the California current.Calif. Coop. Oceanog. Fish. Invest. Repts.21:68-78

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