



CETACEAN RESEARCH IN REUNION'S ISLAND: PORTRAITS OF A RESIDENT AND A MIGRATORY SPECIES

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Dedicated cetacean surveys are been conducted in Reunion since 2004, to assess species diversity and distribution around the island. Specific studies are conducted on two of the most common coastal species encountered: the indo-pacific bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*) and the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Surveys are conducted year round, from boats launched from different locations around the island. Survey area extends up to 5 NM offshore. In 2004-2008, 1740 hours at sea and 490 sightings of 10 different species of cetacean were achieved. Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin's site fidelity and association patterns were investigated using photo-identification methods. A total of 63 individuals were identified based on natural marks on their dorsal fins. Recapture rate was relatively high (64%) and sightings were restricted to waters less than 50m deep, suggesting a resident population in Reunion's coastal waters. Groups averaged 8 individuals and their compositions were very fluid, with no permanent association between individuals, expected mother-calves pairs. Photo-identification technique was also applied to humpback whales, which are observed seasonally, from June November, in Reunion shallow waters (<100m deep). To date, 129 individual whales have been photo-identified from the characteristic of their flukes and no inter-annual recapture has been performed, suggesting no site fidelity between years. A sharp increase in the frequentation of Reunion's island as a breeding and mating area was observed in 2007-2008. Time interval of individual resightings ranged from 1 to 45 days, suggesting that whales spent periods of days to more than a month in Reunion's waters. Regional comparison of fluke photographs is in progress and should provide a better understanding of humpback whale migratory movements within the south-western Indian Ocean. The coastal habitats of these two species make them particularly exposed to human activities, including whale/dolphin watching, which is increasing in the area, while no regulation is in place.

Oral presentation