



Workshop on
Marine Mammal Research and Conservation in Africa
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Cetacean research and conservation in La Reunion Island (France)

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Although some large scale cetacean surveys have been conducted in the western Indian Ocean, La Reunion coastal waters have never been surveyed for cetaceans. Since 2004, a local NGO is conducting cetacean surveys off the island with the objective of assessing cetacean diversity and collecting photo-identification and behaviour data on the species encountered. Surveys are conducted year round, off the southern and western coast of the island, up to 5 NM off shore. In 2004-2006, 218 days at sea were achieved, including 941 hours of searching effort and 183 sightings. Nine species were observed in the survey area (and 2 additional species stranded alive). The most frequent species sighted are the Indo-pacific bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*), the spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*) and, from June to October, the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). The bottlenose dolphin (*T. truncatus*), the pantropical spotted dolphin (*S. attenuata*), the melon-headed whale (*Peponocephala electra*), and the Fraser's dolphin (*Lagenodelphis hosei*) occur in deeper waters of the study area. The short-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhyncus*), the Antarctic minke whale (*Balaenoptera bonaerensis*) and the sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) are rarely observed within 5NM from the coast. Photo-identification data demonstrates a resident population of Indo-pacific bottlenose dolphin (54 individuals photo-identified), restricted to waters less than 50m deep. Three species regularly use the newly created Marine Protected Area: the spinner and bottlenose dolphins and, seasonally, the humpback whale. These coastal species are frequently exposed to whale/dolphin watching activity.