

IRISH WHALE AND DOLPHIN GROUP

NEWSLETTER APRIL 1991

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group had a very successful inaugural meeting on 2nd March, 1991 at University College, Cork. About 100 people attended the meeting, including university and government scientists and representatives of most of the wildlife conservation organisations in Ireland. Martin Sheldrick (Natural History Museum, London) and Dr. Peter Evans (Cetacean Study Group, University of Oxford) were invited to address the meeting and they explained how cetacean stranding and sighting schemes are organised in the U.K. and what they may achieve. The group formally proposed that the Irish government declare Irish waters an International Whale Sanctuary (see Whale Sanctuary) and expressed regret that there was nobody employed to collect cetacean records and important whale remains or maintain a national database. A network of regional co-ordinators was established to record cetaceans washed up on the Irish coast and sighted in Irish waters (see Stranding & Sightings schemes).

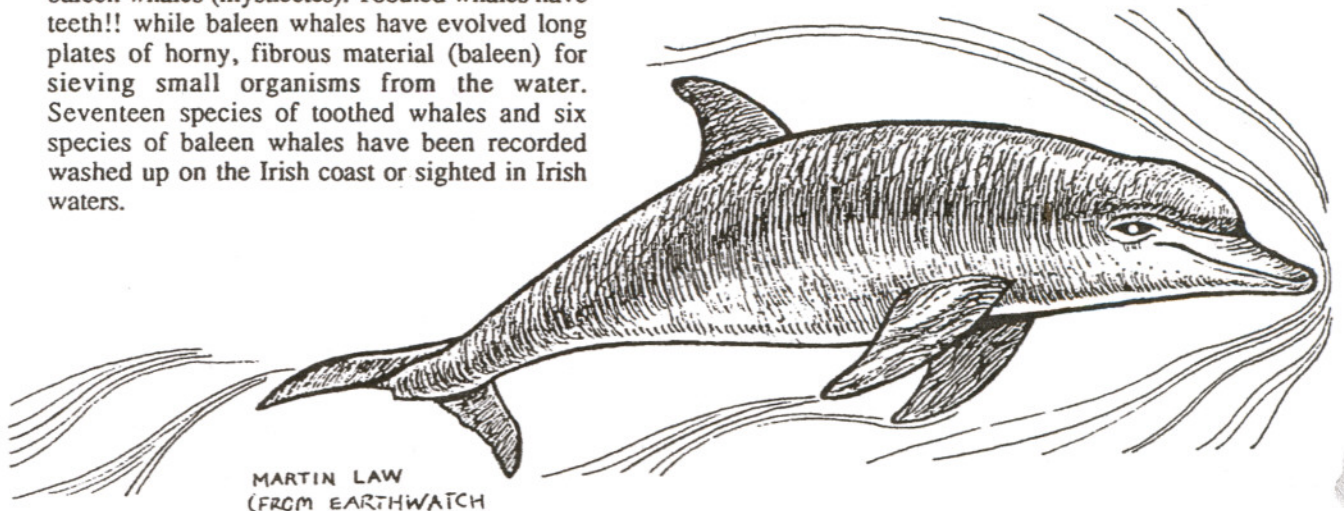
WHAT IS A CETACEAN?

Whales, dolphins and porpoises all belong to the order *Cetacea*. There are 77 species worldwide, occurring in all oceans and some tropical rivers. They can be broadly divided into two types, toothed whales (odontocetes) and baleen whales (mysticetes). Toothed whales have teeth!! while baleen whales have evolved long plates of horny, fibrous material (baleen) for sieving small organisms from the water. Seventeen species of toothed whales and six species of baleen whales have been recorded washed up on the Irish coast or sighted in Irish waters.

Irish Whale & Dolphin Group Objectives

The IWDG is dedicated to the study and conservation of cetaceans in Irish waters. It is not a club or society, as there are plenty of them already working on wildlife issues in Ireland, but a collection of people, both amateurs and professionals, interested in cetaceans and keen to get actively involved in their study and conservation. Although Irish waters are recognised as one of the most important areas in Europe for cetaceans there is very little known about cetacean distribution, status, seasonal occurrence or ecology off the Irish coast, all essential information for their successful conservation. By collecting and analysing this kind of information the IWDG will take a leading role in cetacean research and conservation in Ireland and make a major contribution to the knowledge of cetaceans in Europe.

Information from the IWDG will be freely available and will include advice on the welfare of cetaceans stranded alive, identifying potential threats to cetaceans in Ireland, producing documents on cetaceans when necessary and providing an opportunity for the dissemination of information on cetaceans in Ireland. There is no membership fee as the running of the group is supported by private donations and support from other organisations. The IWDG will be run to meet the requirements of its members and anyone who is interested in cetaceans in Ireland is encouraged to get involved.



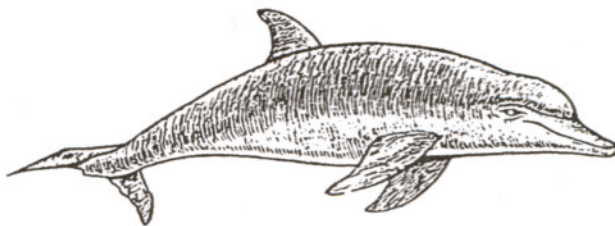
Cetaceans sighted off the Irish coast

Information from cetaceans sighted at sea is much more difficult to obtain than for strandings but can be much more useful in assessing distribution, abundance seasonal occurrence and behaviour. Since 1975 sighting records from Irish waters have been collected by the Cetacean Study Group in the U.K. This work has shown that major concentrations of cetaceans occur off southwest Ireland (Fig. 1) and that Irish waters contain important breeding and feeding grounds for some species. Harbour Porpoise, Pilot Whales, Risso's Dolphins and Bottlenosed Dolphins breed off the south and southwest coasts, while larger species such as Fin Whales, Minke Whales and occasionally Humpback Whales migrate annually through Irish waters. Other species such as Sperm Whales and rare Beaked Whales occur in deep water west of the continental shelf.

The IWDG have produced a standardized recording sheet for recording cetaceans sighted at sea. In the near future, a slide pack and hopefully a video will also be available to help observers identify cetaceans. Do not be worried if you can not easily identify cetaceans at sea as a record of an unidentified cetacean is better than no record at all. If anybody is interested in recording cetacean sightings, contact their regional co-ordinator or Simon Berrow, Zoology Dept., University College, Cork.

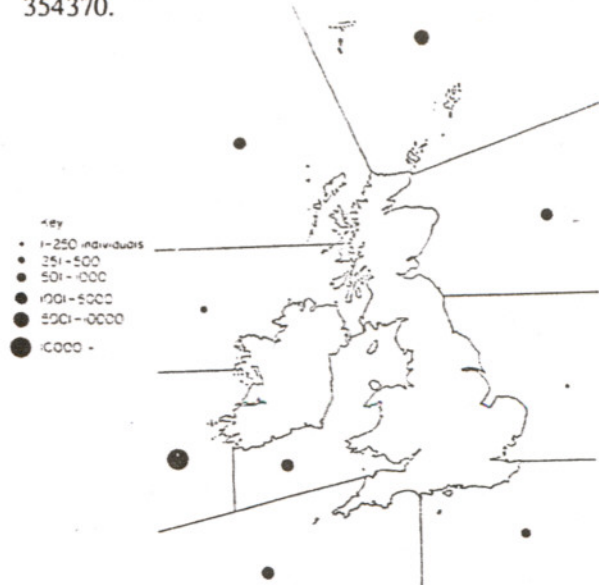
WHALE SANCTUARY

The IWDG have called on the Irish government to declare a single order to protect all whale species in Irish territorial waters (200 mile, exclusive fisheries zone) by a Refuge for Fauna Order under the Wildlife Act (1976). This Order, if implemented, would make Irish territorial waters an International Whale Sanctuary, the first of its kind in Europe, and enable Ireland to take a leading role in the conservation of cetaceans. As the pressure to lift the moratorium on international whaling increases, this proposal is seen as an important step in the protection of whales throughout the world and is an unequivocal statement on Ireland's position on whaling. For further information on this proposal contact John Woodlock, 42, Hillside Gardens, Skerries Co. Dublin (01) 6793455.



Welfare of Cetaceans Stranded Alive

There has been increasing concern regarding the welfare and first aid of cetaceans that have stranded alive but are unable to return to the sea. This is a frequent occurrence on the Irish coast and the correct treatment of these animals needs to be addressed. Ideally, there should be informed and experienced people available throughout the country to advise on, or take responsibility for, these animals. The IWDG is setting up a working group to produce guidelines for the welfare and first aid of these animals and anybody interested in getting involved should contact Brendan Price, Tobergregan, Garristown, Co. Dublin (01) 354370.



Overall cetacean concentrations in British waters. Totals include sightings of unidentified species.

Sponsorship

The IWDG is very grateful for the support and sponsorship of the Irish Wildlife Federation, Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Aer Lingus, U.C.C., Sligo R.T.C., Earthwatch, Sligo R.T.C. Students Union and private donations. Without this support the IWDG would not be able to achieve its objectives. Any donations should be sent to Dr. Emer Rogan, Treasurer, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, c/o Zoology Dept., University College, Cork. When asking for any information please enclose a stamped, addressed envelope.

Regional Network

One of main functions of the IWDG is to establish and co-ordinate a regional network of observers to record cetaceans washed up on the coast or observed at sea. At present there are 18 regional co-ordinators spread over the whole coastline. These contacts are able to identify and record stranded cetaceans and obtain biological samples for pollution analysis and other research. They will also seek records of cetaceans sighted at sea. Contacts will receive training, if necessary, to carry out this work. Historical and anecdotal information will also be sought. Some post-mortems of cetaceans are being carried out to determine the health status of cetaceans in Irish waters. hopefully this work will soon be expanded. The network will be invaluable in obtaining these samples from a wide range of locations.

Guidelines for regional co-ordinators have been produced and if anybody is interested in getting involved then please contact Simon Berrow, Zoology Dept., University College, Cork or Terry Bruton, Ulster Museum, Belfast.

Publications available

Guide to the Identification of Cetaceans in the North East Atlantic. (P.G.H. Evans), £2.00

First Aid for Stranded Cetaceans (R.S.P.C.A.), £2.00

Whales (P.G.H. Evans) Whittet series, £7.50

All prices are inclusive of p. & p. Orders to IWDG, c/o Zoology Dept., U.C.C.

Scientific papers on cetacean ecology are available from group members for the cost of reproduction. A full list will soon be available.

Information from Stranding Schemes

There have been records of cetaceans washed up on the Irish coast since the 1700s. However, unlike England and Wales there is no legal requirement to report stranded cetaceans in the Irish Republic, so recording has often been erratic. Some records have been published in the scientific literature and the number recorded has steadily increased since the 1960s (Fig. 1), with 1990 being a record year. Does this increase represent an increase in people recording stranded whales, increased abundance of some species off the Irish coast or maybe increased mortality? There were 47 animals recorded stranded in 1990 (an average of 22 animals per annum were recorded during the last decade) which, when compared with 149 on the U.K. coast, suggests that this is only a fraction of the total number stranded.

Stranding schemes can be used to crudely assess the distribution, abundance and population status of cetaceans off the coast and identify potential threats to cetaceans. For example, the number of pilot whales reported stranded on the Irish and British coasts has increased since the 1950s suggesting they are occurring more frequently in Irish waters. Stranded animals are also the source of a wide range of tissue samples which can be used to assess pollution loads, diet, age, reproductive state and many other aspects of their ecology.

Information gathered by the IWDG will be maintained on a data-base and will be freely available to anybody. This information will be essential for the conservation of cetaceans in Irish waters. Anybody interested in recording stranded animals please contact their regional co-ordinator or Terry Bruton, Ulster Museum, Belfast.

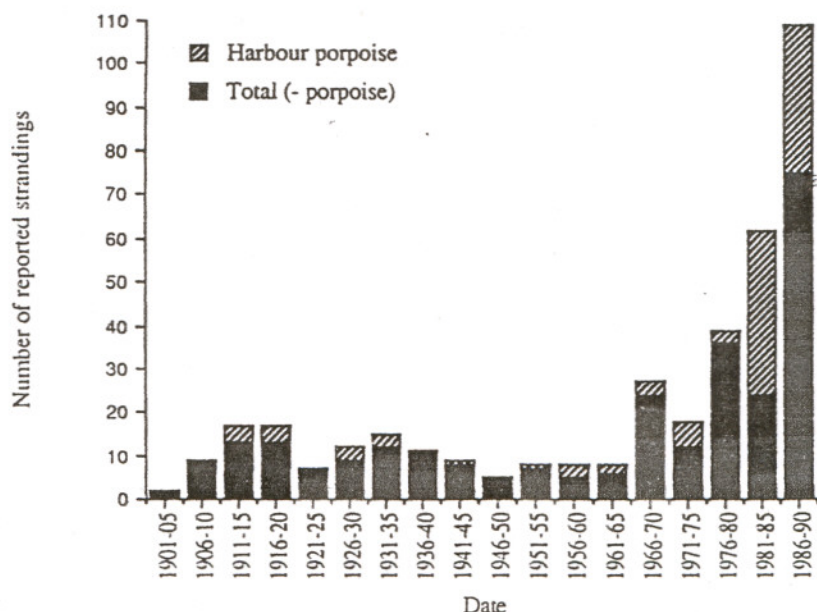


Fig. 1 Number of published stranding records in the present century.

REGIONAL CO-ORDINATORS

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