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STRUCTURE AND OPTICS
OF THE
ANTERIOR SEGMENT
OF THE
CETACEAN EYE

A Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy
at
Massey University

LYNDA MELLOR
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ABSTRACT

The anterior segment of the mammalian eye is concerned with the function and maintenance of its optical components, the most important of these being the maintenance of transparency and stable intraocular pressure. The structures of the eye change throughout life. Continuous growth occurs in the lens, and a number of other changes associated with aging also occur, many of which reduce visual capacity. Many of these manifest in humans because of their long life span but have very little relevance in terms of survival. However, other long lived animals such as some birds, reptiles and whales, could be severely compromised by complete or partial blindness associated with aging. The aims of this study were to evaluate the importance of vision as a sense in whales by observation of the structure and optics of the anterior segment, and compare the findings with other species whose visual functions are well known. Pathological changes were recorded where appropriate.

The findings in this thesis are based on a three year survey of eyes from 45 whales in which i) differences between species in the size of the globe, lens, and cornea are described ii) the unique histological structure of the uveal tract is demonstrated and defined iii) evidence of emmetropia in both air and water from NMR images of two eyes is given iv) lens shape and capsular features which indicate that there could be a capacity for accommodation, are described, and v) lens pathology (four cataracts and one case of phacolysis) is described in five animals.

The largest whales (baleen and sperm) had the largest eyes, but this was mainly due to the thickness of sclera. Internal dimensions showed little variation with respect to body size, suggesting that there is an upper limit on internal size which is dependant on the focal length of the lens, a structure which enlarges only slightly with age. Corneal and lens sizes were especially large in the baleen whales, and particularly small in the sperm whale.

The uveal tract was found to be very vascular when compared to other species, and particularly well innervated with specialised nerve endings which are thought to be unique to cetaceans. Although the findings are not conclusive, evidence from this study suggests that the whales' unique uveal vasculature and aqueous drainage methods may be instrumental in modifying the dioptic strength of the eye. The abundance of specialised pressure-receptors in the ciliary body indirectly supports a proposed mechanism for this, whereby the engorged ciliary body raises intraocular pressure causing increased corneal curvature, and releases tension on the zonule to allow 'rounding up' of the lens.

Optically, the study showed that eyes from two long-finned pilot whales were
emmetropic by virtue of a cornea with only a very small amount of optical power in both air and water, and a very powerful lens (about 72D in water). Emmetropia was thus not affected unduly by transition from air to water as it is in most mammals, where the cornea is optically very significant in air but neutral in water. Lenses in both animals showed an unusual 'bump' on the central posterior surface, and the increased radius of curvature in this area was responsible for the very high dioptric strength of the lenses.

The prevalence of lens pathology, particularly cataracts in young animals, was high, but in all cases the cause was unknown.
Acknowledgments

This thesis represents the requirement for a Master of Philosophy degree, which was undertaken in the former Department of Veterinary Pathology and Public Health (now the Institute of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences) at Massey University.

The study lasted for three years, and eyes from 45 dead stranded cetaceans were examined. The work would not have been possible without the cooperation of the Department of Conservation (DOC) and its staff who have helped to develop a network of communication which enables tissues to be collected and distributed as soon as possible post mortem.

I am indebted to the late Professor David Blackmore for so willingly giving his time in discussions for the planning of this study. His wisdom, knowledge, and breadth of vision were a source of inspiration; his enthusiasm a source of energy; and his advice, to ‘follow your passion’, has been invaluable.

I am most grateful to my supervisors Associate Professor Maurice Alley and Dr Per Madie for their flexibility of approach, their cheerful advice and support, and their willingness to embrace areas of study which were outside their own particular interests. Many hours of painstaking attention to detail by Associate Professor Alley have ensured that the material is presented as fluently and comprehensibly as possible, and I thank him for improving my writing skills.

Dr Craig Eccles supervised Chapter 7 and was instrumental in producing NMR images and processing the data in a ray drawing package which he developed specially for thick lenses to suit the purposes of this work. I am sincerely grateful to him.

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Eyes were collected from cadavers in the field and in the PM room by a variety of DoC staff, Dr Per Madie, Mr Alan Nutman, Dr Jane Hunter, Dr Padraig Duignan and Mr Gareth Jones. I am most grateful to them all.

I would like to thank Mr R. Palmer for providing an ophthalmoscope, so that if the opportunity to examine a live whale’s eye arose, I would be equipped.

My husband David, after discussion and agreement, had no input into the scientific aspects of this project, but provided encouragement throughout to pursue this study as a means of both increasing current knowledge of whale biology, and more personally, as a means of acquiring research, writing, and life skills. I thank him for this, and for his role model in patiently and painstakingly striving to achieve excellence.
ADDENDUM

PAGE 11.

A rete is a body of convoluted blood vessels, commonly found in mammals, connecting arteries to veins, arteries to arteries, and veins to veins. They are believed to store blood and regulate its flow.

PAGES 25, 56, 107, 109, 111, 114, 115.

There are significant limitations involved in measurement of material in these cases for the following reasons:

i] many of the specimens were suffering from some degree of autolysis. This may have affected subsequent dimensions. In addition, lens and cornea increase in thickness with post mortem imbibition of water.

ii] formalin fixation can also alter the dimensions of structures. Although this was investigated prior to the study and found not to be a significant factor for structures measured to the nearest millimetre, it may have been a significant factor for microscopic techniques with measurements in microns.

This has not been taken into account when presenting data.

iii] artefactual changes associated with tissue processing may have affected the sizes of structures in histological studies. Where these changes were obvious, the sites were avoided for measurement.

iv] some of the variations in size may have been attributable to the age and size of the animal. Lenses enlarge throughout life, and capsular thickness varies with age.

PAGE 54.

An unequivocal conclusion that whales lack pectinate ligaments could only be made using more sophisticated techniques, such as scanning electron microscopy or photographs taken with a dissecting microscope of the 'en face' view of the ciliary cleft. This study merely reports that the pectinate ligament was not evident in any of the histological sections examined in these whales.

PAGE 56.

Dimensions of the ciliary body would have been better expressed as a percentage of overall ocular size.
There are some limitations involved in the use of Indian ink to trace aqueous outflow pathways using in vitro specimens; there is no possibility of active transport mechanisms operating; autolysis may damage the permeability of membranes and affect the resistance to flow of molecules; in addition, fixation will contract all membranes, valves and tissue spaces, and coagulate all proteinaceous substances within them. Better results would have been obtained using more sophisticated techniques, such as tracing the passage of latex microspheres or radioactively labelled substances in live animals.

The study documents a small number of lesions in moderately autolysed specimens. Cataract was diagnosed on the basis of gross, rather than histological findings. However, strictly speaking, post mortem diagnosis of cataract should meet very specific histological criteria. The value of this chapter is to highlight the need to examine whales' eyes for cataracts with an ophthalmoscope at every possible opportunity, particularly at post mortem of by-catch or stranded animals.
LIST OF FIGURES

2-1 Comparative ocular morphology of three marine vertebrates. 6

3-1 Standard terms for positions on the globe. 22

3-2 Longitudinal, midline section of cetacean eye, showing areas sampled. 23

4-1 The relationship between dorsoventral and mediolateral globe diameters. 27

4-2 The relative dimensions of the mediolateral and dorsoventral globe. 28

4-3 Relationship between globe size and corneal size. 29

4-4 The relationships between globe size, scleral thickness, and internal axial diameter. 30

4-5 Axial and vertical lens values for whales. 31

4-6 Axial globe, axial and vertical lens dimensions. 32

4-7 Corneal size with respect to lens size. 33

5-1 a) Photo and b) diagram of the eye of a pygmy sperm whale 42

5-2 a) Diagram and b) photo of the ciliary body area of a pygmy sperm whale 43

5-3 a) Iris of Cuvier's Beaked whale E15-97 x56 b) x140 44

5-4 Iris of long finned pilot whale. 45

5-5 Cross section of a nerve at the base of the iris. 45

5-6 Iris of long finned pilot whale. 46

5-7 Cross section of nerve in iris. 46

5-8 a) Photomontage of a human iris from Hogan et al. (1971) at magnification x40 compared with b) H&E stained section of the iris of a sperm whale x12.5. 47

5-9 Ciliary processes of a long finned pilot whale 48

5-10 High power view of processes H&E x133. 48

5-11 Ciliary body of pygmy sperm whale E413-95 49
5-12 Iris of Minke 28609-97.

5-13 a) Photomicrograph from pygmy sperm whale 27961-97 showing large fluid filled sinus and associated venous plexus. a, lumen of large sinus. x20.

5-13 b) Photomontage of large sinus. x66.

5-14 a, b and c (facing page). Empty sinuses in outer layer.
   a) Cuviers beaked whale 28543-97
   b) Minke whale 28831
   c) pygmy sperm whale E413-95

5-14 d and e. Blood filled sinusoids in inner layer
   d) Dolphin 27796-97
   e) Minke whale 28609-97

5-15 Uveal trabecular meshwork of pygmy sperm whale E413-95

5-16 a) Photomontage of pygmy right whale ciliary body showing zones of meshwork and sites od ER's (arrows). x26.

5-16 b) High magnification of a single encapsulated receptor situated at the junction of uveal and corneoscleral zones (white arrows). x400.

5-18 a) Area of tapetalised choroid in a pygmy sperm whale E413-95
   b) Area of non tapetalised choroid in a steer

5-19 a) Blood supply to the choroid of pygmy sperm E413-95.
   b) Diagram of blood supply.

5-20 Pygmy sperm whale rete.

5-21 Long finned pilot rete.

5-22 Southern right bottlenose rete.

5-23 Drainage angle of long finned pilot whale showing limits of Indian ink percolation.

6-1 Diagram of a latitudinal section of the ciliary body in pygmy sperm whale 27961-97 showing study sites.

6-2. The relative shapes, lengths and distribution of four encapsulated receptors (ERs) a, b, c, d and e in pygmy sperm whale 29761-97.

6-3 Photomontage of ERs a, b, c, d in sclera of pygmy sperm whale 27961-97.

6-4 a) First evidence of ER 'e' appears as a small group of perineural cells.
b) At 40 microns ER 'e' is seen in oblique section.

c) At 60 microns, showing an oblique section of ER 'e'.

d) At 76 microns, a cross sectional view of ER 'e' with a small axon joining from the left.

e) At 116 microns, a cross sectional view of ER 'e' with small remnants of an axon still visible.

f) At 124 microns, a cross sectional view of ER 'e', now much reduced in diameter.

g) At 132 microns, the last evidence of ER 'e'.

Photomontage of ciliary body of pygmy sperm whale

Photomontage of ciliary body of sperm whale

Photomontage of ciliary body of long-finned pilot whale

Type one receptors in latitudinal section of ciliary body of minke whale 28831-98.

Oblique section of an encapsulated receptor from pygmy sperm whale 27961-97.

Section of trabecular meshwork in a minke whale (28609-97).

Section of trabecular meshwork of long-finned pilot whale (E425-95).

a) Single ER in pygmy sperm whale E413-95 H&E x400.

b) Single ER in pygmy sperm whale E413-95 Holmes silver x280.

c) Single ER in pygmy sperm whale E413-95 Van Gieson stain x400.

d) Single ER in pygmy sperm whale E413-95 Masson's trichrome x666.

Longitudinal receptor from Cuvier's beaked whale (E15-97).

Longitudinal section of an ER from a pygmy sperm whale(E413-95).

a) Cuvier's beaked whale x280. Myelinated nerve in longitudinal
6-15 b) As 6-15a. Cross section of mixed, mainly myelinated nerve.

6-16 a) As 6-15a). Group of receptors in longitudinal section.
6-16. b) As 6-15a). Group of receptors in cross section.

6-17 a) Type 3 receptors in ciliary body of dolphin 27865-97.
6-17 b) High magnification of a group of receptors x800

6-18 Group of encapsulated receptors from sperm whale E90-97 in dense sclera.


6-20 Receptors in ciliary body of a sperm whale in cross section.

6-21 High magnification of group of receptors in the ciliary body of a sperm whale showing a wide range of axon sizes. x1400.

6-22 a and b) a sperm whale ER, focused at different planes to illustrate the ‘hole’ or ‘tunnel’ that occurs in some cases.

6-23 a) and b) a sperm whale ER stained with Holmes silver and focused in deep and superficial planes.

6-24 Conjunctival surface of eyelid with dermal ERs.

6-25 Encapsulated receptor in dermis of anterior blowhole skin of a long finned pilot whale.

6-26 Small ER at the tip of an epidermal peg.

6-27 a) Light micrograph of a single ER in sperm whale E90-97.
6-27 b) Electron micrograph a similar ER.

6-28 Inner core of an ER in a sperm whale.

6-29 Outer capsule area of an ER from sperm whale E90-97.

6-30 Mixed nerve from sperm whale E90-97 showing ER’s ‘e’ within its structure.

6-31 ER from sperm whale E90-97
6-32 ER from sperm whale.

6-33 Higher magnification of ER in Figure 6-32.

6-34 Receptor from sperm whale E90-97 showing non-symmetrical form.

6-35 Higher magnification of a non symmetrical, Ruffini type receptor.

6-36 Mixed nerve containing lamellated receptors in a long-finned pilot whale.

7-1 Graph to illustrate central and peripheral corneal thicknesses in 7 whales.

7-2 Cornea of dolphin showing typical mammalian structure and small epithelial capillaries.

7-3 Diagram of a long finned pilot whale cornea at 2x life size.

7-4 Diagram of a pygmy sperm whale cornea at 2x life size.

7-5 Diagram of a harbour porpoise cornea at 2x life size.

7-6 Diagram of a human cornea at 2x life size.

7-7 a) Dolphin lens

7-7 b) Bisected dolphin lens showing concentric lamellations.

7-8 a] NMR image of bovine lens and b] NMR image of pilot whale lens.

7-9 View of anterior segment with moderately constricted pupil.

7-10 Diagram of a vertical axial section of a cetacean lens to identify sites of capsule measurements.

7-11 Diagram of a vertical axial section of a human lens to identify sites of capsule measurements. From Hogan et al. 1971.

7-12 a) NMR image 2.1 of long finned pilot whale 44-98 and b) photograph of the lens from this specimen.

c) (facing page) NMR image as above, without markers
7-13 a) NMR image 5.1 of fresh eye of long finned pilot whale 38-98
   b) (facing page) NMR image as above but without markers.

7-14 a] and b) facing page. Ray trace diagrams obtained from NMR
   images 2.1 and 5.1 of long finned pilot whale eyes. a) in air and
   b) in water.

7-15 'Ray Trace' diagram of simulation of corneal focal length in
   the isolated cornea from image 5.1 in air to water and water to water.

7-16 Focal lengths in symmetrical and asymmetrical lenses

7-17 Ray trace diagrams to simulate the effects on focal length
   of modifying radius of curvature of posterior lens surfaces
   in images 2.1 and 5.1.

8-1 Photomontage of ciliary body area, choroid, suprachoroid
   and sclera of Bryde's whale with proteinaceous exudate.

8-2 Choroid, suprachoroid and sclera of long finned pilot
   whale E193-97 with marked lamellar separation where exudate occurs.

8-3 Minke lens (25485-95) in an area where lens fibre cell walls
   are still present.

8-4 Lens of dwarf minke 27926-97 with cataract (left)
   compared with the normal lens of a dolphin (right).

8-5 Anterior Capsular/subcapsular area dwarf minke whale lens,
   showing large lesion (arrows).

8-6 Bisected eye of foetal pygmy sperm whale with cataractous
   lens dissected out and displayed on iris and retrobulbar structures.

8-7 Comparison of lens sizes and shapes. a, adult Grays beaked whale;
   b, dolphin; c, minke 27926-97.

8-8 Lens of straptoothed whale

8-9 Lens of Gray's beaked whale

8-10 a) Photomicrograph of Gray's beaked lens with cataract x400
   b) x800
# LIST OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Adaptations to a marine environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1i Body adaptations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1ii Ocular adaptations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Importance of vision as a sense</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong> LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Gross anatomy and biometrics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1i Size and shape of the globe</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1ii Muscles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1iii Glands</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1iv Lids</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 The Uveal Tract and Iridocorneal Angle</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2i General structure and function</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2ii Limbus and drainage angle</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2iii Innervation of the ciliary body</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2iv Choroid, rete and tapetum</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Anterior segment - anatomy of the dioptric elements and dioptric state</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3i Anatomy of the cornea</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3ii Lens</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3iii Optics of the cetacean eye</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Experimental techniques used in the assessment of refractive state</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4i recent techniques for the assessment of refractive index in lenses</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Pathology of the cetacean eye</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Sources of material
3.1i Preparation of material
3.1ii Preparation for histology

4 BIOMETRICS and GROSS ANATOMY

4.1 Abstract
4.2 Introduction
4.3 Materials and methods
4.4 Results
4.4i Ratio of dorsoventral and mediolateral globe diameters
4.4ii Corneal globe size relationships
4.4iii Relationship between scleral thickness and internal globe size compared to external globe size.
4.4iv Relative sizes and shapes of lenses
4.4v Internal axial globe relationship to size of lens
4.4vi Corneal diameter relationship to lens diameter

5 THE UVEAL TRACT AND IRIDOCORNEAL ANGLE

5.1 Abstract
5.2 Introduction
5.3 Materials and methods
5.3i Histological survey
5.3ii Comparative Study of Iris
5.3iii Comparative Study of Ciliary Bodies
5.4 Results
5.4i Comparative Study of Iris
5.4ii Comparative Study of a Cetacean Ciliary Body
5.4iii Comparative Study of Cetacean, Bovine and Human Ciliary Bodies and Limbi using Photomontage Diagrams

5.3iv Choroid

5.5 Discussion

6 ENCAPSULATED RECEPTORS

6.1 Abstract

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Materials and methods

6.3i Topographical Study

6.3ii Histology and Ultrastructure

6.4 Results

6.4i Topographical Study

6.4ii Association with Vessels

6.4iii Size, Site and Orientation of Encapsulated Receptors in the Eyes of Twenty Whales

6.4iv Histology of Encapsulated Receptors in a Series of Twenty Whales

6.4v Encapsulated Receptors in Other Sites

6.5 Ultrastructure of Encapsulated Receptors

6.5 Discussion

7 OPTICS AND THE ANTERIOR SEGMENT

7.1 Abstract

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Materials and Methods

7.3i Corneal Study

7.3ii Lens Study

7.3iii Globe Study

7.4 Results

7.4i Corneal Study
7.4ii  Lens Study
7.4.iii  Globe Study
7.4iv  Simulations of Hypothetical Situations
  a] isolated corneal focal length
  b] isolated lens focal length
  c] remodelling of posterior lens surface to achieve emmetropia.

7.5  Discussion
7.5i  Corneal Study
7.5ii  Lens Study
7.5iii  Globe Study

8  PATHOLOGY
8.1  Abstract
8.2  Introduction
8.3  Materials and Methods
8.4  Results
  8.4i  Minke Whale 25485-95 with Cataract
  8.4ii  Dwarf Minke Whale 27926-97 with Cataract
  8.4iii  Pygmy Sperm Whale 27685-97 with Bilateral Cataracts
  8.4v  Bottlenose Dolphin 28112-97 with Phacoclastic Uveitis
  8.4v  Yellow Lens Colouration in Beaked Whales
8.5  Discussion

9  SUMMARY DISCUSSION

10  BIBLIOGRAPHY
APPENDICES

4 - 1

Table A4-1.
45 Whales examined in studies

5 - 1

A5-1 Ciliary body of minke 28609-97
A5-2 Ciliary body of sperm whale E90-97
A5-3 Ciliary body of pygmy sperm whale 27961-97
A5-4 Ciliary body of long-finned pilot whale E432-95
A5-5 Ciliary body of a Cuvier’s beaked whale
A5-6 Ciliary body of a steer
A5-7 Ciliary body of a zebra x24
A5-8 Ciliary body of a kangaroo
A5-9 Ciliary body of a sheep

6 - 1

Method for Holmes’ silver stain
Additional notes on morphology of encapsulated receptors
Figure A6-1 Longitudinal cross section of a simple symmetricall lamellated corpuscle
Table A6-1. Classification of symmetrical and asymmetrical receptors

7 - 1

Table 7-1a. Thickness of corneal layers at intervals throughout available length of cornea
Table 7-1b. Total corneal thickness at intervals throughout available length of cornea

7 - 2 Generalised lensmakers formula
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The order cetacea demonstrates extreme diversity between its 78 species. Morphologically, size can vary from the small Hector's dolphin at 1.3m in length to the 30m blue whale (Dawson 1985). Habitats can range from polar to tropical seas, with a few freshwater species. Some species, such as some of the beaked whales, are seen rarely. This could be due to their pelagic habits and relatively short periods spent at the surface, or could indicate a genuinely small population. Other species, such as many dolphins, are seen frequently because they have a coastal habit and spend large periods of time near the surface.

Whales evolved in the late eocene period around 53 million years ago (Dawson 1985). Both mysticetes and odontocetes are believed to have evolved from land based artiodactyls (even toed ungulates).

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) described dolphins as having lungs, and as being like humans in their behaviour, growth, and reproduction, but still referred to them as fish (Dawson 1985). Similarly in biblical times, the whale was considered to be a fish (Jonah, Old Testament). However, by 1776AD Linnaeus had devised a theory for the classification of animals which is still in use to day, in which he states;

“I hereby separate the whales from the fish....
...... On account of their warm bilocular heart,
their lungs, their movable eyelids,
their hollow ears, penem intrantum
feminam mammis lactentem”.

Even in 1851, the claim that the whale is a mammal and not a fish, was disputed. In Moby Dick (Herman Melville 1851) the description is given;

“to be short then, the whale is a spouting fish
with a horizontal tail”.

Melville’s problem with the mammal theory was probably that it was inconceivable that the inhospitable and alien environment of the deep ocean could be inhabited by anything other than fish. The very fact that this ‘fish’ had a horizontal tail, unlike any other fish, and a body motion in a corresponding plane, should have indicated its mammalian rather than piscine nature.

Earliest investigations of the cetacean eye were in the sixteenth century (Pierre Belon, 1517 - 1564, and Guillaume Ronderkelt 1507 - 1566, cited by Waller 1984). In 1719 Anton van Leewenhoek dissected a whale’s eye that had been preserved in wine by the captain of a Greenland whaling boat, and noted the thick sclera.
Leewenhoek, who was famous for his invention of the light microscope, was able to put this instrument to good use in identifying and describing the ophthalmic rete mirabile, and the lamellar construction of the lens (Waller 1984).

Walls in 1942 and Prince in 1956 produced texts on comparative anatomy which were mainly descriptive in orientation. They included small amounts of information on cetacean eyes.

Since 1972, further innovative and original study of the cetacean eye has occurred, covering many aspects of anatomy, histology and optics.

1.1 ADAPTATIONS TO A MARINE ENVIRONMENT

1.1.1 Body Adaptations

Massive evolutionary adaptations have been necessary for whales to maintain themselves in an environment which is extremely hostile to a class that originally evolved for land living.

The ocean environment represents a challenge because it presents extremes of pressure, temperature and light intensity.

Pressure increases by one atmosphere for about every 10m increase in depth (Kooyman and Ponganis 1998). A shallow dive of this depth would therefore be equivalent to 2 atmospheres (202.6kPa or 30psi). During dives, the flexible ribs collapse to reduce lung volume and gas becomes compressed into the upper airways (Kooyman and Ponganis 1998). Heart rate slows, and blood is diverted to muscle and the central nervous system (CNS). Although cardiac output reduces, stroke volume and blood pressure are maintained (Kooyman 1989). Air filled compressible areas become filled with engorged rete vessels. In addition to mechanical effects on anatomical structures, pressure affects proteins at a molecular level, which could affect muscular contraction and nerve conduction (Schmidt-Nielson 1990) so special adaptations to alleviate this effect must exist.

Water temperature can be variable, but more importantly the thermal conductivity of water is so much higher than that of air that there is a significant need to maintain body temperature. Fur and feather insulation have been replaced by a thick layer of blubber.

Light intensity decreases with depth so that depending on the quality of the water, 90% of light may be absent at 9m and 99% at 35m (Walls 1942). There is a constant potential for drowning, and the whale has developed mechanisms to reduce the threat of this in the form of specific diving adaptations, such as an extremely high oxygen carrying capacity by virtue of a high haematocrit during dives and high mean corpuscular haemoglobin content.
(MCHC). The circulating and stored blood volumes are similarly increased, and much more oxygen is stored as myoglobin than in humans (Schmidt-Nielson 1990). The animal is always alert by virtue of the brain’s arrangement that only one cerebral hemisphere shuts down at a time during sleep (Ridgway 1988).

1.1ii Ocular Adaptations

The cetacean eye has also adapted dramatically to meet the needs of wide variations in light intensity, temperature, pressure, osmotic effects and the loss of corneal power underwater. Hydrostatic pressure adaptations are complex. If an analogous plastic bag full of water is taken underwater to a pressure of 10 atmospheres, it will not suffer deformation. Compressive forces only exist where there is an air interface, such as around the thorax, sinuses and middle ear, and this is where the most profound adaptation occurs. There is a distinction between a compressive force, and hydrostatic pressure. It is not known what adaptations to increased hydrostatic pressure the eye has made, particularly with respect to the protection of nerve function. “High pressure nervous syndrome” has been described in several species (not cetaceans) as a direct mechanical effect of pressure on nerves, but the mechanism remains unexplained (Kooyman 1989).

The osmotic gradient imposed by seawater affects mainly the cornea. A thick layer of viscous jelly protects the corneal surface (Prince 1956). This layer is not thought to contribute to the dioptric strength of the eye (Dawson 1980). The jelly also provides protection from suspended particulate matter, since eyelashes are absent, as they are of little use in this medium.

The loss of dioptric power by the cornea when the eye is immersed in water occurs because the refractive indices of the cornea and water are similar (Walls 1942; Prince 1957; Dawson 1972). In land animals, the cornea is the main refractive device contributing about 2/3 of the dioptric strength of the eye while the lens contributes 1/3 (Spooner 1957). When the eye is submerged and the effect of the cornea is lost, the lens has sole responsibility for refraction. Land animals are therefore longsighted (hyperopic) underwater. Cetaceans have adopted the fish model of a powerful, spherical lens to combat this effect. However, unlike the fish whose vision is entirely aquatic, some whales, such as dolphins and orca (Delphinidae sp.) also need good aerial vision. Another problem arises when the whale eye with its powerful lens is taken out of water and into air. It is believed that if the cornea is reinstated as an important refractive element, when coupled with a powerful lens the system becomes hopelessly myopic. However, in reality we know that dolphins have good eyesight in air from their displays in dolphinaria. Visual acuity in Delphinidae sp. has been tested and found to be similar to that of a cat in daylight (Spong et al. 1971; White et al. 1971; Herman et al. 1975).
1.2  IMPORTANCE OF VISION AS A SENSE

Whales are “top feeders” (ie. they are at the top of the food chain consuming an energy rich, carnivorous diet of plankton, krill, fish or squid) and are therefore reliant on their intuitive and acquired skills as predators. When the anatomy of the ungulate eye and the cetacean eye are compared it is obvious that the cetacean eye differs in a number of ways, suggesting that vision has become highly adapted and is therefore a sense of some significance.

If eyesight is important to cetaceans, it is possibly more important to some species than to others. In the Ganges River Dolphin, which is reputed to be sightless, the eye is small and the optic nerve is a mere thread (Tinker 1988; Waller 1983). Madsen and Herman (1980) have suggested that vision has many important functions in cetacean life, including navigation, group movements, prey detection and capture, predator defence, and for identification and communication of behavioural state.

Visual problems may be a relevant consideration in the question of why whales ‘actively’ strand. It is noteworthy that strandings occur mainly in a few odontocete species and all are deep diving whales with non-coastal habits. In New Zealand, the commonest stranders are pilot whales, false killer whales and sperm whales, and these are responsible for 84% of individual and a high proportion of mass strandings (Brabyn 1992).

It is not known how migration in whales is accomplished, but magnetite has been found in the dura mater of Delphinus delphis which suggests that magnetic information may be used for orientation (Zoeger et al. 1981). In addition, a relationship between magnetic minima and mass strandings has been demonstrated (Klinowska 1985; Kirschvink 1986) and also between magnetic storms and strandings (Klinowska 1985).

Other methods of orientation or ‘homing’ such as chemotaxis, the ability to detect vibrations with a lateral line system or electric fields using electoreceptors, detection of polarised, infra red or ultraviolet light have not been demonstrated in cetaceans. Local orientation is achieved by echolocation in toothed whales. Spatial orientation is assumed to be achieved, like other mammals, by a series of proprioceptive and vestibular reflexes. These may be of more significance in aquatic environments because these animals may need to be able to orientate without the aid of fixed visual topographical cues such as a horizon, sky, or ground. The effect of gravity may be small, even zero, depending on the buoyancy of the body. Without light, reference points, and in neither positive nor negative buoyancy it can be possible to suffer from spatial disorientation until proprioceptive mechanisms stabilise. Although downwelling light may be absent as a navigational cue in the deep sea, sensitive vision is necessary to perceive light produced by marine organisms, either from photophores, or from
bioluminescent organisms in the gut.

When considering the cranial nerves, their comparative sizes are often used as indicators of their relative importance. The optic nerve is the third largest cranial nerve in whales although this is variable between species. This adds further support to the statement that vision is a significant sense in cetaceans. The largest cranial nerve in mysticetes is trigeminal five and in odontocetes is auditory eight. Odontocetes have well developed echolocation skills, hence the size and importance of this nerve. The second largest is auditory eight in mysticetes and trigeminal five (supplying the melon) in odontocetes (Tinker 1988).

The facial nerve is relatively large in both families. Other nerves associated with the eye such as oculomotor three, abducens six, and and trochlea four, vary according to the mobility of the eye. Hypoglossal, olfactory and glossopharyngeal nerves are small, reflecting the relative unimportance of these senses (Tinker 1988). This information indicates that the importance of vision has often been severely underrated as a special sense in whales.

The aims of the present study were to examine the anterior segments of several species of whale to determine their anatomical and histological features and correlate these with a range of possible functions, but particularly accommodative capacity; to determine the refractive state of one or more whales to establish whether there is a refractive error in air; and to record any pathological changes observed.

From these observations, some hypotheses can be formulated about the importance of vision as a sense, and how this, or its pathology, may contribute to the stranding phenomenon.