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FALSE KILLER WHALES
(*PSEUDORCA CRASSIDENS*)
IN NEW ZEALAND WATERS



A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Conservation Biology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2014

Abstract

On a global scale, false killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*) remain one of the lesser-known delphinids, with most knowledge about the species originating from infrequent stranding reports. Herein I examine the occurrence, site fidelity and association patterns of false killer whales in the waters of northeastern New Zealand from historic stranding records (1870 to date) and at-seas observations collected between 1995 and 2012.

Despite the infrequency of strandings (28 recorded events in 144 years), false killer whales are among the most numerous cetaceans to strand on New Zealand shores due to large mass strandings events. Stranding records suggest that the species occurs predominantly in North Island waters, with only 7% of strandings ($n = 2$) recorded on South Island shores. Hawkes Bay and the Chatham Islands appear to be stranding hotspots for the species in New Zealand.

At-sea encounters support occurrence in northern waters, with all sightings reported in waters off northeastern New Zealand. False killer whales were infrequently encountered in the study area; however, of the 61 distinctive photo-identified individuals, 88.5 % ($n = 54$) were resighted, with 70.5 % ($n = 43$) resighted on three or more occasions, with two individuals observed eight times. Eighty-five percent ($n = 52$) were observed in more than one year and at least two individuals were resighted almost seven years after their initial identification, with movements as far as 650 km documented for eight individuals.

Results indicate that all false killer whales photo-identified in the study area so far, are linked in a single social network. Group sizes ranged from 20 to *ca.* 150 ($\bar{x} = 46.7$, $SD = 28.48$). Distance from shore and bottom depth ranged from < 1 to 67.4 km ($\bar{x} = 9.16$, $SD = 14.85$) and 25 to 350 m ($\bar{x} = 105.33$, $SD = 86.66$) respectively, with most records in shallow (< 100 m) continental shelf waters. Occurrence in these nearshore waters is likely seasonal, with all sightings between December and May, coinciding with the shoreward flooding of a warm current during that period. Abundance estimates indicate that the number of individuals that occurred in the study area during the sampling period may be as low as 111. While some individuals exhibited injuries consistent with detrimental fishery interactions, these were scarce ($n = 2$), with no new injuries recorded since 2007.

Additionally, interspecific associations between false killer whales and common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) are described, with the two species observed together during 91.5 % ($n = 43$) of encounters. These mixed-species groups occurred across the entire range of the study area and during all encounter months. Group sizes for common bottlenose

dolphins within these mixed-species groups ranged from 5 to *ca.* 250 ($\bar{x} = 62.8$, $SD = 42.79$). Photo-identification shows repeat inter- and intraspecific associations among individuals. Thirty-four percent ($n = 51$) of common bottlenose dolphins photo-identified in mixed-species groups with false killer whales had repeat associations with false killer whales, with 28.2 % ($n = 42$) resighted in such groups in more than one year. Individuals were observed together with false killer whales up to 1832 days (*ca.* 5 years, $n = 2$) after association was initially recorded and across a range as far as 650 km ($n = 1$). While foraging was observed during 39.5% ($n = 17$) of mixed-species encounters, observed predation by killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) and close interspecific interactions suggest that anti-predatory and social factors may also play a role in the formation of these mixed-species groups.

This study represents the first long-term record of seasonal resightings of this species in New Zealand waters and suggests the likelihood of a small local population. A precautionary approach in the assignment of the species' appropriate conservation status is therefore recommended.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Dr. Karen Stockin for taking me on and believing in the false killer whale project. I appreciate the opportunity and all the support you have given me. Thank you also to my co-supervisor Dr. Emmanuelle Martinez for tirelessly and promptly answering any question and to Dr. Ingrid Visser for getting the ball rolling.

This project is the result of a great collaborative effort of commercial tour operators and fellow researchers. A sincere thank you goes out to my fellow Massey University researchers Sarah Dwyer, Anna Meissner, Catherine Peters and Tania Gaborit-Haverkort and the Orca Research Trust's Dr. Ingrid Visser for sharing their data with me. This thesis would not be the same without your contributions. The study could not have been realised without the support from whale- and dolphin-watch operators from around New Zealand. Thank you to everyone who contributed sighting reports, photographs and a wealth of information on false killer whales in their areas.

In the Bay of Islands; Fullers Great Sights for allowing access to their historic whale-watch records; the crew of the *Tutunui*, in particular Joanne 'Floppy' Halliday and Tammy Johnston; Rob Hunt and Gemma Langsdale from Explore Images, Sue Hews from Magic Memories, William Goodfellow and Kit Nixon from Explore New Zealand and Vanessa McKay from Carino Dolphin Sail. On the Tutukaka coast; Kate Malcolm from Dive Tutukaka. In the Hauraki Gulf; the crew of Dolphin Explorer, in particular Andy Light. In the Bay of Plenty; Stuart Arnold, Rosie Roess and Cameron Fines and Helen Cadwallader from Dolphin Seafaris. Graeme Butler from *Gemini Galaxsea*, Patrick O'Sullivan from PeeJay White Islands tours. In Kaikoura; Dennis Buurman from Dolphin Encounter, Jody Fish and Alastair Judkins from the Kaikoura Ocean Research Institute (K.O.R.I.). In Christchurch; Cally Burke and Chris Collins from Heritage Expeditions.

The following operators kindly participated in the presence/absence of sightings survey: Dolphin Rendezvous, Carino Dolphin Sail, Dolphin Discoveries, Great Sights, Dive Tutukaka, Dolphin Explorer, Butler's Gemini Galaxy, Dolphin Seafaris, Pee Jay White Island Tours, Dolphin Watch Ecotours, Golden Future, Dolphin Encounter, Whale Watch Kaikoura, World of Whales, Black Cat Cruises, Real Journeys, Monarch Wildlife Cruises, Fiordland Expeditions, Aihe Eco Charters, Rakiura Charters, Kaikoura Helicopters, Pelorus Tours, Heritage Expeditions. Thank you for sharing your information with me.

The following people supplied additional photographs: John Allan, Annika Andresen, Rebecca Bellini, Alex Black, Robert Bradley, Tom Brough, Sonja Clemens, Matthew Coutts, Mary Cowling, David Donnelly, Clinton Duffy, Mandy Everett, Sarah Gardner, Margaret Ginnelly, Cathy Goeldner, Daniel Goetz, Monica Greco, David Hall, Tommy Hatwell, Lara Kay, Lily Kozmian-Ledward, Karin Neumann, Daniel Panek, Taira Peters, Mazdak Radjainia, Richard Robinson, Jean Paul Rouen, Nathan Turner and Elisa Weiss. Thank you!

A special mention goes to Dr. Robin Baird. Thank you for all your support and good advice and for being a fountain of knowledge on all things *Pseudorca*.

Thank you to Phil Crawford from Greenpeace for background information and use of their false killer whale image, to Sakae Hemmi and the Elsa Nature Conservancy for use of their image and to Dr. Simon Ho, Dr. Tom Gilbert and Dr. Robin Baird for use of figures.

Thank you to Dr. Gabriela de Tezanos-Pinto, Dr. Emmanuelle Martinez and Jens Currie for help with statistical analysis.

Thank you to the Department of Conservation; Elke Reufels for permit assistance and operator liaisons and Hannah Hendriks for compiling records of the New Zealand Stranding database.

Thank you to Aquatic Mammals and Marine Mammal Science for permission to include their research articles in this thesis.

Thank you to my 'fin-fatigued' friend Jo Berghan for tireless fin matching, meticulous reviewing, good chats and yummy meals. Sarah Dwyer and Catherine Helen Peters for help with just about anything, and Lily Kozmian-Ledward for mutual support and cheering up. My fellow whale rescuers Joanne 'Floppy' Halliday and Dr. Ingrid Visser for all sorts of personal and logistical support. Millie Coleing for help with reviewing. Tom Brough, Marta Guerra and Anna Meissner for plenty of good advice and James Ross for financial and practical support.

Lastly, immense thanks go to my dad, Gerhard Zaeschmar for his continued support and to my husband, Geir Sveaass for endless patience, encouragement and understanding.

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