

# **Historical records of cetaceans in S. Tomé and Príncipe**

**A preliminary report from Projecto Delfim**

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## **Introduction**

Cetaceans and human beings have a long common history of ecological interactions, sharing a series of conflicts in the use of marine environment. Whaling as an industrial activity is much more recent in the history of man, and in some places of the world it still remains as a subsistence activity. During the modern whaling in the Southern Hemisphere, the great whales were the principal species to be captured.

To obtain the historical data about the cetacean's presence and the direct capture of large whales in S. Tomé and Príncipe region, a bibliographical research was made in several Portuguese libraries and in the international literature edited. We consulted both historical reports of journeys through the Atlantic, as well as biologic and scientific publications. The preliminary historic research was conducted during 2002 and 2003, simultaneously with the biological research to study cetacean's occurrence, but a significant effort was made in 2004 which allowed obtaining data in the National Archive of S. Tomé and Príncipe.

Efforts are presently being done in order to obtain funding to study all the national and international legislation referring to whaling and whale's captures in S. Tomé and Príncipe, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, a complete historical study on whaling in the Atlantic islands is now taking place in Portugal.

## **Cetacean historical presence**

Historical reports and descriptions suggests the occurrence of many and different "kinds" of dolphins in the Gulf of Guinea. A report of a journey from Portugal to Angola during 1575 and 1576 - Second journey of Paulo Dias de Novais de Garcia Simões to São Paulo of Luanda, at 20<sup>th</sup> of October of 1575 – refers the presence of dolphins as follows:

*«(...) the morning came with our boat surrounded by such a number of big fishes over the water, that in a mile we could not see anything else, and more surprising was that they were slapping with their heads in the water and jumping with all the body above*

*the water, others jumping high up and slapping with great noise on the water surface. This show lasted for two hours.*

*(...) At the 17<sup>th</sup> of January we sighted Ano Bom Island, 200 miles from Angola and 25 from São Tomé. After the line we came across with many big fishes such as porpoises, which are like pigs and others like it.*

*(...) On that day a fish came to our boat, swimming some time around it, and it did not show any other thing than a black flag out of the water like a wing straight up.»*

The first two descriptions seem to refer to large groups of hundreds of small oceanic dolphins, which often follow the boats for long periods of time. In these descriptions we can even find references to their exuberant aerial behaviours. In the third one, the author is probably describing the presence of an orca, showing the typical big black dorsal fin of a male of that species.

In much more recent literature are referred to the Gulf of Guinea: coastal populations of *Tursiops truncatus*, *Delphinus delphis* and *Globicephalas* spp.; migrating populations of *Orcinus orca*, *Kogia*, *Feresa*, *Peponocephala* and *Balaenoptera*; pelagic populations, that migrate every year from the Arctic and Antarctic, of *Physeter macrocephalus* and *Balaenoptera*. Besides these species, Mouzinho Figueiredo also refers, from whaling records, the occurrence of *Megaptera novaeangliae*. In the data reported from whaling records we could not find any reference to small cetaceans or delphinids, but their historical occurrence will be the subject for a future and more detailed study.

At the present moment there is no known deliberate exploitation of large whales off West Africa, but earlier this century, large numbers of humpbacks and other species were captured off Gabon, S. Tomé, Congo and Angola. Commercial whaling in the Gulf of Guinea began in the XVIII century, and continued through 1959, centred mainly in humpback whales because these waters were known as a reproduction zone. An “aboriginal” whaling was established in Pagalu by 1885, and humpback calves were the main targets of this hunt.

In 1912, eleven companies were operating off the West African coast, and at that time there were no whaling regulations in the region and the captures were thought to be particularly high. To explore the waters off S. Tomé and Príncipe, the activity was

based on the French Gabon, and between 1913 and 1952 a total of 8938 individuals have been captured. Captures were not continuous, with periods of significantly more activity, which was regulated by the abundance of whales in the coastal waters of the archipelago. After ending in 1924, this activity only restarted in 1935 and 1936, and in that period 918 whales were captured.

In 1951, at Rosema beach in the Northeast of S. Tomé, a whaling company was established but only remained in activity during 104 days (13 of July to 25 of October). During this period, they declared that 714 large whales had been captured, corresponding to the average of seven whales per day. These captures were composed by humpback whales, bryde's whales (*Balaenoptera edeni*), fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) and sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), and a total 54 embryos were found. In 1952, the reduction of the numbers of captured individuals lead to the end of this activity in the archipelago.

