

Cetaceans occurrence in S. Tomé and Príncipe, Gulf of Guinea

From whaling to whale watching

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Introduction

S. Tomé and Príncipe is an archipelago located in the Gulf of Guinea in front of the Gabonese coast. This equatorial archipelago seems to be an important area for cetaceans, probably due to large concentrations of prey, as well as the existence of several small bays and shallow water that constitute preferred rest areas. A 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 during 2004.

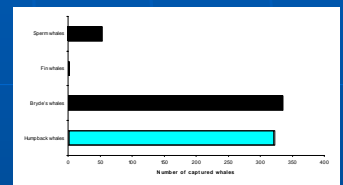
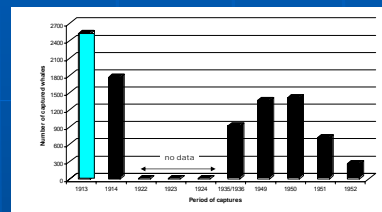


In the 16th century

Historical 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 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 17th 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.»

During the 20th century

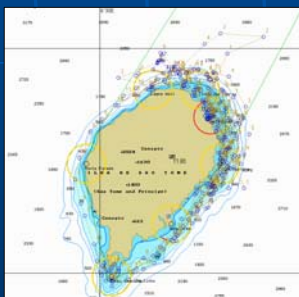
Presently, there is no known deliberate exploitation of large whales off West Africa, but in the early 20th century, large numbers of humpbacks whales, sperm whales and other whale species were captured off Gabon, S. Tomé and Príncipe, Congo and Angola. Commercial whaling in the Gulf of Guinea began in the 18th century, and this area has been historically considered a breeding ground for humpback whales, which were the main target of whale captures since the 19th century. 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 whales have been captured.



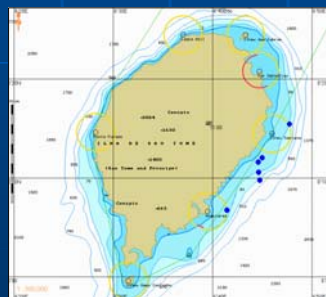
Number of captured whales during all the whaling period in the coastal waters of S. Tomé and Príncipe; between 1922 and 1924, whaling activities also took place but there are no data on the captures.

Number of the different whale species captured between 13 of July and 25 of October of 1951.

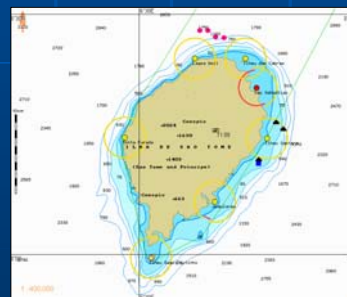
In the 21st century



Sampling effort in S. Tomé during 2004



Sightings of humpback whales (●) in S. Tomé during 2004



Sightings of bottlenose dolphins (▲), pantropical spotted dolphins (○) and killer whales (■) in S. Tomé during 2004

Recently whales seem to be returning to this area which allowed starting several biological studies. In S. Tomé and Príncipe, a change from a consumptive attitude to a more conservation-oriented perspective as occurred, where scientific research and a careful whale watching programs replaces past whaling activities.

Species	Nº of Sightings	Foto-id	Acoustic recording	Skin samples
<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	6	yes	no	2
<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	3	yes	yes	-
<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	4	no	yes	-
<i>Orcinus orca</i>	1	yes	yes	-

Number of sightings and type of data collected for each cetacean specie.



(1) Pantropical spotted dolphins; (2) Humpback whales; (3) Bottlenose dolphins; (4) Orcas; (5) Scientific research; (6) Observing the dolphins.

Acknowledgments:

