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FIRST RECORD OF THE HUMPBACK WHALE, *MEGAPTERA NOVAEANGLIAE* (BOROWSKI, 1781), FROM THE ADRIATIC SEA

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ABSTRACT

Only five records of humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski, 1781) have been reported from the entire Mediterranean Sea, but none from the Adriatic. Here we report on a 90-minute sighting of a 9-10 m long specimen in the central Adriatic in August 2002.

Key words: *Megaptera novaeangliae*, humpback whale, first record, Adriatic Sea

PRIMA SEGNALAZIONE DI MEGATTERA *MEGAPTERA NOVAEANGLIAE* (BOROWSKI, 1781) IN MARE ADRIATICO

SINTESI

Per il mare Mediterraneo sono note solo cinque segnalazioni di megattera *Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski, 1781), fino ad oggi nessuna delle quali in Adriatico. L'articolo riporta l'avvistamento durato novanta minuti di un esemplare di megattera di 9-10 metri, in Adriatico centrale.

Parole chiave: *Megaptera novaeangliae*, megattera, primo avvistamento, mare Adriatico

INTRODUCTION

Humpback whales *Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski, 1781) are distributed in all oceans, ranging from tropical wintering grounds along the islands and continental coasts to the edges of polar ice zones in summer. In the eastern North Atlantic they overwinter around the Cape Verde Islands and off northwest Africa. These stocks spend summer from New England to southeastern Baffin Island, along the western coast of Greenland, north to Disko Bay, around Iceland and around Norway.

The summer migration of the Cape Verde population northward is still poorly documented (Leatherwood & Reeves, 1983).

Humpback whales are seen around Cape Verde Islands from December until June. If the migration from Cape Verde northward really exists, it should therefore start from May (Jann & Wenzel, 2001; Jann *et al.*, in press). The relationships between the animals in Cape Verde and those wintering in the West Indies remain unknown. But the analysis of humpback songs from the Cape Verde Islands and the West Indies suggests a possible exchange of animals between these feeding grounds (Winn & Winn, 1978).

No documented population of humpback whales exists in the Mediterranean, where the specimens observed were certainly vagrants from the eastern North Atlantic population.

Only five records have been reported for the entire Mediterranean Sea: a young specimen captured near Toulon (France) in 1885; two specimens sighted and photographed in 1986 north of Minorca (Balearic Islands, Spain); a juvenile in the Gulf of Gabes (Tunisia) in 1992, and a young specimen incidentally captured near Cavalaire (France) in 1993 (Notarbartolo di Sciara, 2002). In April 2001, a humpback whale, measuring about 10-11 m in length and seemingly in good health, was seen breaching in the Argolic Gulf near Tolos (Greece), about 55 miles southwest of Athens. Video footage was presented during the 15th European Cetacean Society Meeting held in Rome in May 2001. Additional records are currently in press by Frantzis and colleagues (Frantzis *et al.*, in press).

In this paper we report the first record of *Megaptera novaeangliae* in the Adriatic Sea and the Italian waters.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Adriatic basin is part of the Mediterranean Sea, linked to its central part through the Strait of Otranto. The bottom is mainly sandy or muddy. It is a warm sea with a mean temperature almost always above 11-12 °C. The shallow northern basin is cooler in winter, reaching 6-8 °C, and warmer in summer, when the surface temperature can reach 26-28 °C. The salinity shows great oscillations and the coastal water can be greenish due to

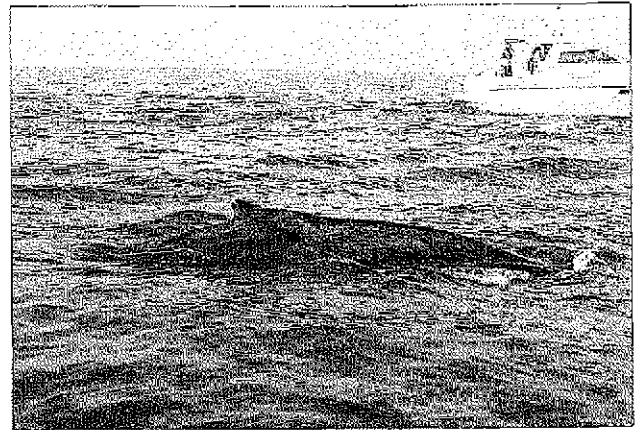


Fig. 1: The humpback whale's back appeared skinny, with vertebra protruding. (Photo: G. Stanzani)

Sl. 1: Osebkov hrbet se je zdel mršav z močno poudarjenimi hrbtničnimi vretenci. (Foto: G. Stanzani)

the high concentration of phytoplankton. After heavy rains it can take on a yellow color (Buljan & Zore-Armanda, 1976).

As part of the national network of Centro Studi Cetacei, Fondazione Cetacea is working on marine mammals in the northern Adriatic Sea. Within this framework, the Fondazione Cetacea began, in 1993, the "Onde dal Mare" (Waves from the sea) project, whose purpose is to increase the awareness about cetacean species living in Italian waters. This is done through education and active participation of all persons either working at sea (fishermen or sailors) or vacationing there. The project consists of a network of "calling centers" usually located in marine protected areas, aquaria or other facilities able to contact a large number of people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On 4 August, 2002, at 13:00 h, the Pesaro Coast Guard reported a sighting of a "big cetacean" off the Fano coast (43°50' N, 13°02' E). Three hours later, the specimen was sighted again by a sports boat, only 150 meters off the coast of Senigallia (43°45' N, 13°15' E). The Fondazione Cetacea group reached the animal, with the help of Protezione Civile Numana and Monte Conero diving center of Numana, at about 18:00 h. In the meantime it had moved about 2 miles off. The very long, almost completely white flippers and the typical knobs on the head and on the leading edge of the flippers allowed us to identify it as a humpback whale. It was about 9-10 m in total length.

We followed the specimen for about 1.5 hrs, in good sea, wind and visibility conditions. During the entire sighting, the humpback whale was moving steadily southward without notable deviation. Many photographs and a video were taken (Figs. 1 and 2).

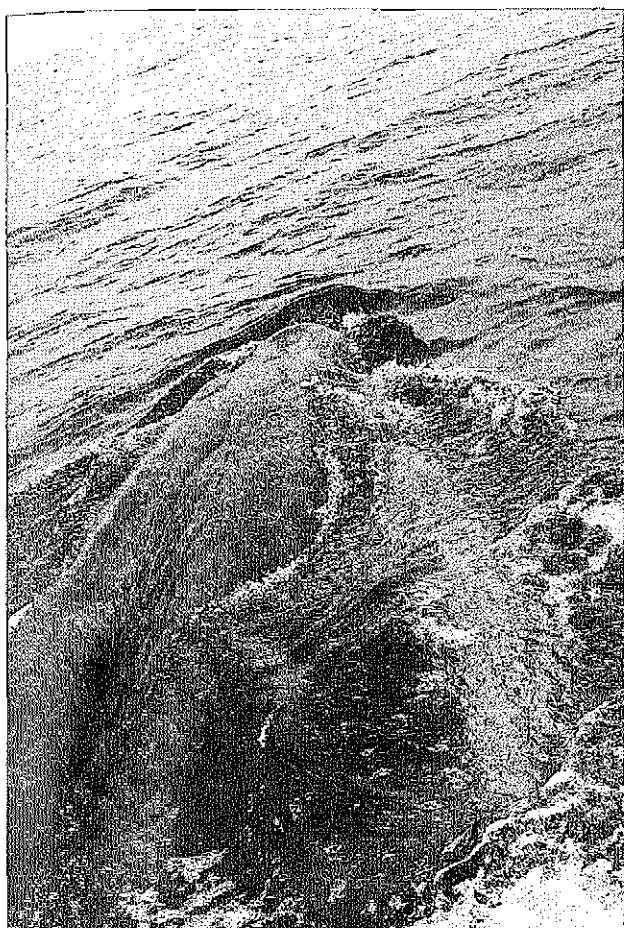


Fig. 2: The very long and white flippers are amongst the most recognizable features of the humpback whale. (Photo: G. Stanzani)

Fig. 2: Zelo dolge, bele prsne plavuti so med najbolj opaznimi značilnostmi kita grbavca. (Foto: G. Stanzani)

PRVI ZAPIS O KITU GRBAVCU MEGAPTERA NOVAEANGLIAE (BOROWSKI, 1781) IN THE ADRIATIC SEA

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POVZETEK

Kit grbavec *Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski, 1781) je bil v Sredozemskem morju doslej zabeležen le petkrat, a še nikoli v Jadranskem morju. Najstarejši zapis je znan iz leta 1885, ko so v bližini Toulona v Franciji ujeli mladega grbavca. Nadalje sledijo s fotografijami dokumentirano opazovanje dveh grbavcev v vodah okoli Menorce (Baleari) iz leta 1986, zapis o mladem osebku v zalivu Gabes (Tunizija) iz leta 1992 ter zapis o nesrečno ujetem mladiču pri Cavalairu v Franciji leta 1993. Nekaj svežih podatkov o pojavljanju grbavca v grških vodah pa še čaka objavo. V pričujočem zapisu avtorji obravnavajo 90 minut dolgo opazovanje kita grbavca 4. avgusta 2002 v vodah blizu Sennigalie (43°45' N, 13°15' E).

Ključne besede: *Megaptera novaeangliae*, kit grbavec, prvi zapis, Jadransko morje

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