

## PRESS RELEASE

### WHALE AND DOLPHIN SIGHTINGS REVEAL OCEAN CHANGES IN THE UK MARINE ENVIRONMENT

**August 2005**

Sightings of large groups of whales and dolphins were among the highlights recorded from around the UK during a one-week special event organised by the marine conservation research charity, the Sea Watch Foundation.

National Whale and Dolphin Watch Week, which finished on August 21, invited members of the public to look out for marine mammals near the UK coastline and send in their reports to Sea Watch. So far, more than 400 sightings have been sent in, and the numbers continue to rise.

Nine species have been reported so far including minke and killer whales, common dolphins, white-beaked dolphins, Atlantic white-sided dolphins, Risso's dolphins, bottlenose dolphins and harbour porpoises. The most unusual sighting of the week was a group of six fin whales observed off the coast of Pembrokeshire in South-west Wales. The group is the largest ever recorded in UK coastal waters.

Dr Peter Evans, Sea Watch's scientific director, said: "Most sightings of this rare species come from the deep waters of the Bay of Biscay or close to the continental shelf edge in Southern Ireland and the Northern Isles of Scotland. In Welsh waters, there are rarely more than a couple of sightings of fin whales a year and these are generally just solitary animals."

The fin whale is second in size to the blue whale, making it the second largest mammal on earth. They usually grow to 19-22.3 metres long and generally weigh between 40-65 tonnes.

Other notable sightings included:

- A group of 20 white-beaked dolphins seen from Stonehaven golf course, near Aberdeen, and other smaller groups off Girdleness
- Several large groups of up to 300 common dolphins seen from Wales, south Devon and the Channel Islands
- A group of 40 bottlenose dolphins, including calves, spotted in and around Cullen Bay, north-east Scotland, and a similar number in the Tay Estuary further south in eastern Scotland
- Risso's dolphins, a species until recently very rare in the North Sea, seen off the north-east coast of Scotland
- Harbour porpoises and bottlenose dolphins widely distributed around the British Isles, including sightings of one or both species off the Northumberland, Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Sussex coasts

Whereas there were numerous sightings of a variety of species off South-west Wales and Eastern Scotland, North-west Scotland had a scarcity of minke whales and white-beaked dolphins compared with previous years, and harbour porpoises remained relatively few in number in the Northern Isles, reflecting a trend observed over the last few years affecting not only porpoises but also other marine wildlife notably seabirds.

Dr Evans said: "This large-scale operation involving observers throughout British Isles has given us a very interesting snapshot of what is currently happening in our marine environment. The presence in the southern Irish Sea of large schools of common dolphins, aggregations of minke whales and an unprecedented six fin whales was associated with flocks of thousands of feeding seabirds and massive shoals of fish on the echo sounder. An adult fin whale requires about two tonnes of food a day in summer to sustain itself, so fin whales need to seek out very large concentrations of food hence the situation we found off South-west Wales. On the other hand, north-west Scotland, traditionally an extremely rich area for whales and dolphins appears to be having a comparatively lean time for particular species this summer. Widespread breeding failure in seabirds in north-west and northern Scotland suggests a lack of small fish prey like sand eels or sprats, and this has been attributed to changes in the flow of the North Atlantic current. The presence of unusual species like Risso's dolphin and common dolphin in the North Sea indicate a stronger flow of the current bringing warmer water into the North Sea.. Other evidence for this comes from reports in northern areas of other marine species like sunfish, basking sharks and leatherback turtles that normally avoid cold waters. Continued surveillance of whales, dolphins and porpoises in different regions around Britain will serve as useful indicators of any ocean changes taking place. All sightings are recorded on the Sea Watch Foundation website [www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk](http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk) which also contains species identification guides and report forms.

National Whale and Dolphin Watch week has taken place every year since 2002. It aims to make the public aware of the 28 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises that occur in British waters. The information gathered is used by Sea Watch to support research into the status and distribution of whales, dolphins and porpoises around the UK, and the conservation threats they face.

**This year's event was sponsored by British Gas, the Department of Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), and the Heritage Lottery Fund.**