SPECIES FACT SHEET –

Pygmy Sperm Whale
(Kogia breviceps)

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Measurements

Length

Newborn: 1.2 m

Full grown: 2.7-4.3 m

Weight

Newborn: c. 53 kg

Full grown: Up to 515 kg

Identification

At Sea

Small sperm whale shaped body with blunt squarish head, dark slightly humped back, and small often recurved fin situated slightly behind centre of the back. Difficilt to spot except in very calm seas.

On Land

Head shape and “false gills” give shark-like appearance. 10-16 long sharp teeth in the lower jaw; usually no teeth in upper jaw.

Description

Head

The head is conical, one-sixth of the body length, and it becomes squarer with age. There are short ill-defined crescent shaped grooves in the throat region, which give the superficial appearance of gills. There is no beak but an underslung jaw. The blowhole is situated on top of the head, generally more than 20% along from tip of snout. There is an oil-filled spermaceti organ above the skull behind a large melon of fatty tissue.

Body, Fin & Markings

The low, often hooked dorsal fin is located just behind the centre of the back. The body is small and stout, dark blue-grey in colour; the outer margins of the flipper and the upper surface of the tail flukes lighten to pale grey on flanks with a dull white belly (sometimes with a pinkish tinge). The flippers are relatively long, wide at the base tapering to a rounded point, and set far forward on the sides near the head. The tail has a concave trailing edge with a distinct median notch.

Distribution

Global Distribution

The species has worldwide distribution, occuring in tropical, subtropical and temperate waters of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Most North Atlantic records are from strandings, mainly along the coasts of SE United States (with a few north to Nova Scotia).

European Waters

There have been a number of strandings within Europe, mostly from Atlantic coasts north to the British Isles, and several sightings mainly in the Bay of Biscay. Strandings have increased in northern Europe since 2000, possibly reflecting warming sea temperatures within the area causing an expansion in the range of their prey.

UK & Ireland

In British and Irish waters there have been a few live sightings between August and November. The furthest north that sightings have been recorded is at 56^{o}N off NW Ireland and in the northern North Sea off Eastern Scotland. Up to 2019, 17 strandings had occurred in the UK, and 10 in Ireland.

Abundance

The species is poorly known and no abundance estimates exist, although they are thought to be relatively uncommon. Due to their cryptic nature, they are probably under-recorded.

Habitat

Pygmy sperm whales typically occur in deep waters beyond the shelf edge. They are found in tropical, subtropical and warm temperate waters, appearing to favour slightly cooler, more temperate, seas than its close relative, the dwarf sperm whale.

Diet

They feed primarily on mesopelagic squid (particularly from the families Histioteuthidae and Cranchiidae) as well as deep-sea fishes and shrimps.

Behaviour

Not well known. They are usually observed individually or in small groups of up to 6 animals, suggesting that they are not very social, however food density may also be a contributing factor. Aerial behaviour is extremely rare. Pygmy sperm whales, when seen at sea, usually appear slow and sluggish and most observations have occurred in very calm conditions with animals typically resting motionless at the sea surface.

Life History

Although data are limited, it is suggested that pygmy sperm whales reach sexual maturity at 3-5 years with a gestation period of 11-12 months. The maximum life expectancy is reported to be approximately 22 years.

Conservation Threats

Due to the scarcity of observations in coastal seas, the species is believed to face few direct impacts from humans. However, they may ingest marine debris such as various forms of plastics, and intestinal blockages resulting from plastic ingestion has been attributed as a cause of death in a few strandings. Some may also drown in fishing gear. Their tendency to lie motionless on the surface has led to occasional ship strikes, whilst the increasing use of sonar, mainly for military purposes, may pose a threat if they lead to stranding events. The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

IUCN status: Data Deficient.

References

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