
A short update on the solitary sociable dolphin situation in the UK.

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ABSTRACT

The last remaining solitary sociable bottlenose dolphin, *Tursiops truncatus*, in the UK disappeared in November 2007 shortly after receiving a serious tail injury. Observations of this animal show that she conformed to the typical pattern of behaviour for solitary sociable cetaceans, including becoming increasingly dominant in her interactions with swimmers. Her rest and feeding behaviour were found to be interrupted by the presence of people in the water.

KEY WORDS: bottlenose dolphin; solitary, sociable, behaviour

INTRODUCTION

There are believed to be increasing numbers of solitary sociable dolphins and other odontocetes worldwide (Frohoff *et al.*, 2006). The reasons for this phenomenon are unclear but may include increasing human activities at sea that encourage the development of such behaviour (Simmonds and Stansfield, 2007a). These animals have been identified as going through a series of stages in their process of habituation to human contact (Wilke *et al.*, 2005), starting with an apparent indifference to human swimmers and culminating with 'enthusiastic', and sometimes even dominant and dangerous interactions on the part of the animal. Solitary sociable cetaceans can attract considerable human attention, including bringing large numbers of tourists to an area. This is a primary reason why they tend to present challenging management issues in terms of providing adequate protection to the animals themselves and their human admirers.

In previous submissions to the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission we have reported on the recent situation of several solitary sociable bottlenose dolphins, *Tursiops truncatus*, in UK waters (Simmonds and Stansfield, 2007a; Simmonds *et al.*, 2006). In Simmonds and Stansfield (2007b), we provided details of the life stories of these animals and recommendations for the management of these scenarios. Subsequent to this last report there were a number of developments related to the solitary sociable bottlenose dolphin living on the coast of Kent (the last remaining of the four known in recent years in the UK) and these are detailed here.

SOLITARY SOCIABLE DOLPHINS IN UK WATERS 2007

Two years ago, there were at least four solitary-sociable bottlenose dolphins in UK waters and two others living near by on the French coast (one of which visited the UK south coast in 2007). Two of the UK dolphins died in 2006 (Simmonds and Stansfield, 2007). One, known as Jet, was struck by a tugboat propeller in Portsmouth Harbour in February 2006. The other, known as Marra, died of an infection in December 2006 in Cumbria, probably facilitated because she was living in polluted waters and had several open wounds. The third, 'Chas', disappeared at some point from the Thames estuary where he, or she, had been observed for a number of months.

‘Dave’ the small, probably juvenile, female dolphin living on her own on the Kent coast in South East England was seen to change her behaviour over time in reasonable accordance with the stages laid out by Wilke *et al.* (2005). She was first reported in this area in April 2006 and, by June 2007, interactions with swimmers had become common. In June 2007, in the early hours of the morning, two men were arrested by the police and charged with disturbing the dolphin under the provisions of the UK’s Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (discussed further below). Towards the end of September 2007, Dave was reported to be increasingly confident in her interactions with people which extended to pushing kayaks around.

A dedicated study of Dave’s behaviour was made for six weeks between August and October 2007. Behavioural events were recorded over 23 survey days for a total of 100 hours from shore-based vantage points (Eisfeld *et al.*, in prep.). Her behaviours were carefully recorded in the presence and absence of people in the water with her and it was notable that behaviours associated with feeding and resting (e.g. diving and logging or slow swimming near a particular buoy) virtually ceased when people were in the water. On many days, people were in the water with the dolphin for all daylight hours and beyond. Hence these changes to her behaviour may have constituted a significant constraint on her abilities to feed and rest (a concern previously raised for other similar dolphins).

Some of Dave’s behaviours seen during this study were at times dangerous to the people in the water with her. She was observed to jump on top of several people and she was also observed on one occasion to stop a young swimmer leaving the water, presumably because she wished to continue to interact with him.

Towards the end of this study, Dave seemed to change her home range and appeared to be swimming further afield. For the previous months she had been confined mainly to an area close inshore stretching from Folkestone to Hythe (approximately 5 km) and rarely more than a few hundred metres offshore. From 22nd September to 3rd of October, she appeared to be missing from her usual haunts. Then, on the 15th of October, she was seen to have received a major recent wound to her tail fluke (Figure 1). A large part of the fluke on one side had been torn away either as a result of entanglement in fishing equipment (possibly a strong monofilament line) or because of a boat propeller strike. There was swift consultation within the UK’s Marine Animal Rescue Coalition, which had been monitoring this animal, and veterinary experts decided that the wound was life-threatening with particular concern about any resulting infection. The dolphin was then treated with antibiotics administered via a hand-held hypodermic syringe. At the same time some fishing line and a hook, which had caused recent superficial wounds to her dorsal fin were removed (Figure 2). Dave’s swimming in the days that followed was relatively slow and sluggish but then, after a week or so, she seemed to start swimming more strongly again. However, she then disappeared and has not been seen since the 9th of November.

Bottlenose dolphins have become rare in this part of the Channel and the Southern North Sea although there was an unusual sighting of at least one bottlenose dolphin on the Belgian-Dutch coast shortly after Dave disappeared (Hiele pers comm.)¹. It is possible that Dave joined this dolphin, or swam elsewhere. However, it is also possible that she perished. Apart from her wounded tail, she had unusual light markings on either side of her dorsal fin and her ‘people-friendly’ behaviour should also make her distinctive.

The disturbance case relating to Dave came to court in early 2008. The trial took 5 days and Dave’s unusual behaviour – specifically that she would approach and interact with swimmers to some degree at this time – was carefully reviewed. This extended to consideration of whether or not she could actually be regarded as a wild animal. This may have been a pivotal point in the case, as the relevant law is intended for the protection of ‘wild’ animals. When the verdict was delivered, several key issues were noted by the chief magistrate, including that the defendants did not leave the water immediately when asked by the police officer attending, that they had handled the dolphin and that they were under the influence of alcohol. The magistrates concluded that they were guilty of ‘reckless disturbance’ (a more serious offence under the same law would have been ‘deliberate disturbance’). The magistrates also concluded that Dave was indeed a wild dolphin. This was the first time that such a case – i.e. a prosecution for disturbance of a dolphin - has been brought to an English court. The guilty

¹ See also: <http://www.mumm.ac.be/EN/Management/Nature/strandings.php> No bottlenose dolphins have been reported this year on the Belgian coast to date, although there were sightings last year.

parties were required to pay a few hundred pounds of court costs and each sentenced to 120 hours of ‘community service’ (i.e. non-custodial sentences).

The group of volunteers who worked to try to protect Dave were recognised for their efforts by a special award given to them by the UK’s Partnership Against Wildlife Crime at its annual meeting in 2008.

CONCLUSION

These latest developments in UK waters are consistent with the issues and problems that relate to solitary sociable odontocetes elsewhere in the world. As the animals become more habituated to human presence, including boats, they become more vulnerable to harm, and many are wounded or killed. Given that there is evidence that this is a growing phenomenon and that it presents significant animal welfare and management issues (and conservation concerns if animals are permanently leaving and thus depleting small populations), we encourage further research into this matter.

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Figure 1. Tail wound – solitary dolphin Kent, UK. October 2008.



Figure 2. Dorsal fin wounds and monofilament line being removed – solitary dolphin, Kent, UK. October 2008.