

A southern right whale, *Eubalaena australis*, entangled in a kayak rope.

MIGUEL IÑÍGUEZ^{1,2} and CECILIA GASPARROU^{1,2}

(1) Fundación Cethus, Potosí 2087, (B1636BUA), Olivos, Prov. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

(2) Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, Brookfield House, 38 St Paul Street, Chippenham, SN15 1LJ, United Kingdom.

Corresponding author, e.mail: miguel.iniguez@cethus.org

ABSTRACT

The presence of southern right whales has been reported all along the Argentine coast. On 4 July 2010 a group of two southern right whales was recorded on video interacting with a kayak off Chapadmalal (38,20°S/ 57,68W), province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. This report is based on an extensive analysis of the video as well as an extensive interview with the coastal observers and the kayakers. This is the first record of a southern right whale becoming entangled in a kayak rope.

KEYWORDS: SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE, *EUBALAENA AUSTRALIS*, ENTANGLEMENT, KAYAC, ARGENTINA.

The Southern right whale, *Eubalaena australis*, (Desmoulins, 1822) is distributed down to 18°S (de Oliveira Santos et al., 2001) with wintering concentrations in southern Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Tristan da Cunha, Namibia, southern Mozambique, South Africa, Island St. Paul, southwest and southeast of Australia, Kemadec Islands and Chile (Rice, 1998). The winter nursery grounds in the southwestern Atlantic are very well known from studies carried out since the 1970's in Península Valdés, Argentina (Payne et al., 1983; Payne, 1986) and Santa Catarina, Brazil (Groch et al., 2005).

Southern right whale populations off both South Africa and eastern South America (Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina) suffer significant mortality. 56 records (48 confirmed) of ship collisions with Southern right whales were reported for these countries and Australia (Van Waerebeek et al. 2007). More recently, on 13th June 2008 a navy vessel collided with a southern right whale, which resulted in the death of the animal (IWC, 2009). On 3rd August 2010 the container ship "Langeless" collided with a southern right whale in the vicinity of Almirante Storni pier, Puerto Madryn, Patagonia Argentina, (Diario El Chubut, 2010).

On 4th July 2010 two southern right whales were recorded interacting with kayakers off Chapadmalal (38,20°S/ 57,68W), province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. An observer recorded the event from shore and made the incident of global interest by uploading it to the internet (www.MDQ-team.com.ar). This report is based on an in-depth analysis of the video as well as an extensive interview with the coastal observers and the kayakers. Four sport fishermen using kayaks 2.65m long, 0.62m wide and weighing 22kg (Atlantikayak's model K1) were located approximately 400m offshore and with a depth of 11m. The kayakers were anchored using a rope 15m in length, 6mm in diameter and an anchor of 1.5kg. Two whales were first sighted at approximately 1100hrs heading NW and in the direction of a kayak. The kayaker stopped fishing to take pictures of the whales. The whale surfaced 5m from the kayak and then swam directly underneath it. A callosity on the head of one of the whales became entangled with the rope dragging the kayak along with it. The kayak bow was sunk causing the kayaker to fall out whereupon he swam away from the kayak. Immediately following this, a second whale located less than 10m from the first whale, turned and swam towards the first one. The second whale pushed the kayak with its head trying to release the other whale while the entangled whale made very quick movements on the surface, exposing half of the flukes trying to free itself from the kayak. Both individuals then swam in a northerly direction, with the entangled whale dragging the kayak for approximately 200m offshore before releasing itself from the rope. Both individuals continued swimming in a northerly direction. The kayaker was rescued by other kayakers and subsequently recovered his kayak and paddle to shore. The event lasted for at least 2' from the time of first sighting; the whales appeared to be undisturbed by the presence of the kayakers and exhibited no aggressive behavior towards the kayakers.

Nowadays, the Southern right whale populations from Argentina and South Africa are registering an annual growth of 6.9% (Best 1990, Cooke *et al.*, 2001). Kayakers have reported several encounters with southern right whales during their migration in austral winter months along the coast off Buenos Aires province (C.S. Marquez and J. Peña, pers. comm.); however this is the first time it has been recorded that a southern right whale has become entangled with a kayak rope. Although this could be an isolated event, the increasing presence of southern right whales in coastal waters along the Argentinean coast, especially in areas with high population density, incidents of this nature could become more frequent than in the past with negative consequences for both humans and whales.

From a management perspective and due to the lack of proper legislation regarding this issue, it is very important to record this kind of event and subsequently work with the coastal communities in order to minimize the potential negative effects of these encounters in the future and help kayakers to deal with a similar situation. Another issue to be considered is the increasing touristic/commercial offers for kayaking with marine animals, especially taking into account the fact that this is an unregulated activity.

Although human-cetacean encounters are more frequent with odontocetes, the encounters with slow-moving mysticetes could result in a greater exposure to harassment and whales could react aggressively if kayakers and other water-users do not approach to them in a responsible way. Further studies are needed to better understand these kind of interactions and to adopt measures needed to reduce any potential negative impacts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank M. de La Serna, J. Peña and C.S. Marquez for sharing the information with the authors. N. Hodgins provided useful comments to our manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Best, P.B. (1990) Trends in the inshore right whale population off South Africa, 1969-1987. *Marine Mammal Science* 6(2): 93-108.
- Best, P.B., Payne, V. Rowntree, J.T. Palazzo and Both M.D.C. (1993). Long-range movements of South Atlantic right whales, *Eubalaena australis*. *Marine Mammal Science* 9:227-234.
- Cooke, J.G., V.J. Rowntree and Payne R.. (2001). Estimates of demographic parameters for southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) observed off Peninsula Valdés, Argentina. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage Special Issue 2*, 125-132.
- de Oliveira Santos, M.C., Siciliano S., Pacheco de Souza, Sh. And Altmayer Pizzorno, J.L. (2001). Occurrence of southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) along southeastern Brazil. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage Special Issue 2*, 153-156.
- Diario El Chubut. 2010. Un buque colisionó una ballena frente a Puerto Madryn. www.elchubut.com.ar. 4 de agosto de 2010.
- Groch, K.R.; J.T. Palazzo Jr, P.A.C. Flores, F.R. Adler and Fabian M.F. (2005) Recent rapid increases in the right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) population off Southern Brazil. *LAJAM* 4(1):41-47.
- International Whaling Commission. (2009). Report of the Conservation Committee. Annual Report of the International Whaling Commission. Annex I, 1-9.
- Payne, R., O. Brazier, E. Dorsey, J. Perkins, V. Rowntree and Titus A. (1983) External features in southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) and their use in identifying individuals. Pp. 371-445. In: R. Payne (ed.) Communication and Behavior of Whales AAAS Selected Symposia Series 76. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado. 643pp.
- Payne, R. (1986) Long term behavioral studies of the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*). *Reports of the International Whaling Commission* (Special Issue 10):161-167.
- Rice D.W. (1998) Marine Mammals of the World: Systematics and Distribution. Special Publication Number 4, The Society for Marine Mammalogy, Lawrence, KS.
- Van Waerebeek, K., Baker A.N., Félix F. , Gedamke J., Iñíguez M., Sanino G.P., Secchi E., Sutaria D., van Helden A. and Wang Y.. (2007). Vessel collisions with small cetaceans worldwide and with large whales in the Southern Hemisphere, an initial assessment. *LAJAM* 6(1):43-69
- Rowntree, V.J., R. Payne and Schell D.M. (2001) Changing patterns of habitat use by southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) on their nursery ground at Península Valdés, Argentina, and in their long-range movements. *J Cetacean Res. Manage. Special Issue 2*: 133-143.