

news

Whales don't wear ear-plugs, Minister

Shay Fennelly

Oil and gas exploration is gathering pace off the Irish coast, with eight wells being drilled this year. How can such drilling be licenced with no assessment of its impact on the marine environment? The basic principle of environmental impact assessment (EIA) is that it is undertaken prior to development, not prior to production.

The discovery of gas off Co Mayo could positively transform the Erris region, but it is vital that the government puts in place the mechanisms and infrastructure to protect the area's natural environment.

Ninety-three years ago, Norwegian whalers had two whaling stations on the Mullet peninsula, which caught over 800 great whales. Today, we know of a rich diversity of dolphins and whales including rare blue whales, off the Mayo coast. Chris Clarke, a US-based whale scientist, has been given access to the US navy SOSUS system, an array of underwater microphones on the seabed, used in the past to locate submarines. Using SOSUS, he has located many more whales than were thought to be present off the Mayo coast.

While welcoming the work commissioned by the Petroleum Infrastructure Programmes (PIPS) to fund a three-year census of seabirds and cetaceans in the Rockall trough, IWDG questions whether this is sufficient to adequately assess and mitigate the potential impacts.

Acoustic pollution

Just as we rely on light to see, whales and dolphins depend on sound to find their way, communicate and locate food. There is concern that sound emissions from airguns

used in seismic surveys to reveal seabed structure may have a negative impact on whales and dolphins.

Although the data is limited, we know that some species like common dolphin avoid airguns; bowhead whales will veer several miles off course during seismic activity; and sperm whales evacuate survey areas. In a recent study, sperm whales some 200 miles from an active airgun array fell silent once surveying began. Seismic activity may interfere with cetacean communication or alter their behaviour; added to this is the risk of physical damage to hearing when in the vicinity of airguns and the fact that seismic surveys may alter the distribution patterns of prey species.

The exploration industry needs close monitoring by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources and Dúchas. Mitigation measures must be adopted for seismic surveys as a condition of licencing.

The EU directive on EIAs applies to the assessment of environmental effects, for example those associated with 'the execution of construction works in the natural surroundings, including those involving the extraction of mineral resources.' Why is the Minister for the Marine exempting seismic surveys and drilling from EIA when there is an international consensus that acoustic pollution from seismic surveys disturbs the normal behaviour and distribution of cetaceans? Why is Dúchas not requesting that Minister for the Marine, Frank Fahey, imposes as a condition of the exploration licence the commissioning of research on the effects of seismic surveys on cetaceans by oil companies?

Habitat protection

The EU Habitats Directive obliges the government to introduce a regime of strict protection for whales and dolphins in Ireland's marine territory. The Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands is obliged to prohibit deliberate disturbance of cetaceans during their breeding and migration and prohibit destruction of their breeding and resting places. All Irish cetaceans are listed in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive - ie they are species of Community interest in need of strict protection - while the harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin are also listed in Annex II - ie they are species whose conservation requires the designation of Special Areas of Conservation. Is Dúchas in breach of the Habitats Directive for not applying the habitat regulations to protect

Shay Fennelly



Broadhaven Bay, Co Mayo: proposed landfall site for the Corrib gas field pipeline.

cetaceans? And why is Minister Sile de Valera not applying the Habitats Directive to whales and dolphins in Ireland's marine territory?

The EU Habitats Directive applies to member states' 200-mile economic exclusion zones, where sovereign oil and gas exploration rights have been exercised. This summer, member states are obliged to submit zones to be included under the Natura 2000 network. The big question is, will Dúchas identify areas as candidate Natura 2000 sites for the protection of rare blue and fin whales off northwest Ireland?

Ireland recently ratified the OSPAR Convention which contracts signatory states 'to take all possible steps to protect their maritime area against the adverse effects of human activities so as to safeguard human health and to conserve marine ecosystems.' It also states: 'the precautionary principle shall apply, and preventative measures shall be taken, when there are reasonable grounds for concern that substances discharged into the marine environment may harm living resources and marine ecosystems, even when there is no conclusive evidence of a causal relationship between the inputs and the effects.'

The gaps in the protection of our marine environment, highlighted by this article, need to be addressed at ministerial level. We look forward to working with Ministers Fahey and de Valera and with Dúchas to improve the protection of Ireland's precious marine environment. ■

IWDG Website:

Visit our website at: <http://iwdg.ucc.ie>

• The Irish Whale & Dolphin Group (IWDG) is dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation

• REGISTERED CHARITY NO CHY11163

IRISH NEWS

- IWDG submission to Corrib gas field impact study

Potential impact of Corrib gas field project

The IWDG recently made a submission to the Corrib gas field environmental impact assessment but was largely ignored. Because we feel its contents are relevant and important, we present an edited version of it here. The full version can be found on the IWDG website.

Enterprise Oil plc propose to develop the Corrib gas field lying approximately 65km northwest of Co Mayo. This area is known to be important for a range of cetacean species and any development should assess and mitigate against the potential impact on these species and quantify the potential loss of habitat.

Cetaceans off Mayo coast

The northwest is one of Ireland's most important areas for cetaceans. Historically, two whaling stations exploited fin, blue, sei and sperm whales there (Fairley, 1981). Information on the smaller, non-commercial species is limited, but surveys indicate the area has high species diversity and high relative abundance. A dedicated IWDG/International Fund for Animal Welfare visual and acoustic survey in 1993 (Gordon et al, 2000) recorded six species during 20 days at sea, including long-finned pilot whales (27%), common (19%) and white-sided dolphins (15%) and minke whales (15%). Harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin were also recorded. A land-based survey carried out in 1992 reported a relatively high abundance of cetaceans, including common and Risso's dolphins (Berrow, 1993). Sightings data from fishery observer programmes off the northwest coast also suggest white-sided dolphins are abundant along the shelf edge (Couperus, 1997), and the recent mass-stranding in Killala Bay suggests these animals move inshore (Rogan et al, 1997).

Of the 23 cetacean species recorded in Irish waters, at least 17 have been recorded off the Mayo coast. The populations of some species (eg blue, right, humpback) have been severely depleted following over-exploitation but have been recorded in recent years, suggesting they are recovering (Evans, 1991). Very rare species such as blue whale may actually occur more frequently than once thought (Clark & Charif, 1998). Two species, harbour

porpoise and bottlenose dolphin, are listed in Annex II of the EU habitats directive, and as such, both they and their habitats are entitled to full protection.

Potential impact of offshore development

The Corrib gas field could impact on cetaceans and their habitats during the construction phase and when in operation.

The potential for disturbance during construction is great. Disturbance may be physical, from construction vessels and structures on the seabed, or, of greater concern, acoustic, through increased noise levels. Acoustic disturbance could be considerable. Common dolphins react to seismic activity at least 8km from the source vessel (Goold, 1999), and the lower the frequency emitted, the greater the area around the source that is affected.

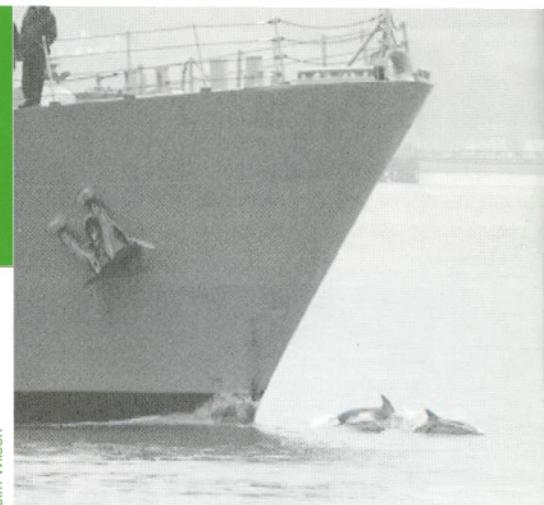
Some species including Ziiphids (beaked whales) may be more susceptible to acoustic disturbance due to their habit of occupying underwater canyons. Sound attenuation is thought to be less in canyons, and the northwest coast of Mayo may be particularly suitable for these little-known deep-diving species.

Underwater construction activity could possibly result in physical damage to hearing, as cetaceans are extremely sensitive to sound. Increases in background noise may force animals out of an area due to annoyance and/or interference with communication and prey location.

The presence of a pipeline on the seabed may interfere with an area's hydrography, not to mention cause physical loss of cetacean habitat. Construction of the land site could impact on inshore habitat for the harbour porpoise, an Annex II species known to occur in the area.

Baseline survey

There is only one contemporary survey of cetaceans in the proposed development area, that by Gordon et al (2000), which involved fieldwork during June and July. This is inadequate to establish a baseline and no comparable data on the occurrence of cetaceans outside this period is available. Thus the minimum requirement for the environmental impact survey would be 12 months' fieldwork using standardised visual and acoustic line-transect methodology to determine seasonal trends in distribution and relative abundance. This is essential for identifying:



Jim Wilson

Common dolphins bow-riding the LE Eithne

- **critical habitats**, eg essential for maintenance or breeding. These areas may be distinct sub-areas within the proposed development site;

- **critical periods** in species' life-cycles, eg calving periods, when animals may be most susceptible to disturbance.

It is neither appropriate nor practical to determine absolute abundance of species in the study area. However, surveys should be carried out on a scale consistent with recording changes in distribution and relative abundance within and adjacent to the study area. Major developments such as construction should be carried out, where possible, outside of any critical periods and away from critical areas, and methods of mitigating impacts should be imposed, eg stopping construction work if cetaceans move within a critical distance of the site - this can be monitored in real time through acoustic monitoring stations, eg sonar buoys.

The EIA should also make provision for assessing the long-term impact on cetaceans. This would necessitate repeats of the baseline survey to determine whether there has been changes in distribution which would require ongoing monitoring throughout the life of the gas field.

Due to lack of detailed knowledge on seasonal distribution and relative abundance, a baseline cetacean survey of the area is a minimum requirement to fulfil the obligations under the EIA directive, together with assessment of the potential acoustic disturbance during construction and operation of the proposed development. ■

Urgent! Bottlenose sightings

Please phone Simon Ingram of UCC about any sightings of bottlenose dolphins so he can travel to the site immediately and photograph them. This project, part-funded by the Heritage Council, uses photo-ID to match dolphins to those recorded in the Shannon estuary, to determine their movements. Contact Simon at 087-9384527 or (021) 431 4493 (home) or (021) 490 4053 (work)

Send your letters, contributions or comments on the magazine to: The Editor, Irish Whale & Dolphin Group, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co Clare.

IRISH NEWS

● News from around the coast

Curragh Colmcille: crew required

The next leg of the voyage of Ireland's largest curragh, *Colmcille*, will take it across the Bay of Biscay from southern Brittany and into Galicia in northern Spain under the leadership of IWDG member Ivor Neill. This leg will take about six weeks between July and August and stop at various ports along the way. For details, see websites: <http://216.32.180.250:80/cgi-bin/link> http://photos.yahoo.com/beardy_dan

There should be ample opportunity between oar-strokes and lashes of the whip for some whale-watching. The Bay of Biscay offers some of the best whale-watching in the world. There is no charge for the voyage, but crew are expected to make their own travel arrangements to meet the vessel.

Anybody interested in joining this expedition should contact Ivor Neill at: ivorneill@hotmail.com or Robin Ruddock at: robinruddock@hotmail.com or visit the website at www.colmcille.org.uk

Dolphin workshop

The Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation (SDWF) is hosting a workshop on 11th June in Kilkee, Co Clare for all those interested in learning more about the bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon estuary. The workshop will be delivered by Simon Berrow (SDWF), Jimi Conroy (Dúchas), Simon Ingram (UCC) and Sarah Ferriss and is open to anybody, but please book as numbers are limited.

• Contact: SDWF at (065) 905 2326 or e-mail: SDWF@oceanfree.net

Shannon Dolphin Festival

A new festival is being held in Kilrush, Co Clare called the Shannon Dolphin Festival. It will run from 19th to 22nd July and include a Whale Roadshow, events for kids, live music and much more. For details, contact Jackie Banfield at (065) 905 2522.

Dolphin-watching in the Shannon estuary



Simon Berrow

IWDG/P&O Ferries surveys

Dave Wall

The IWDG and P&O Irish Sea Ferries have linked up to conduct a survey of the waters between Rosslare and Cherbourg. P&O Ferries have kindly agreed to facilitate IWDG observers on board their vessels to France. The surveys will commence in the next month or so and IWDG observers will survey the route once a month throughout the year. If interested, contact Dave at 087-2977 931. There will be regular updates on the website and in this newsletter. ■

Anniversary of Whale and Dolphin Sanctuary

Thursday, 7th of June, 2001 is the 10th anniversary of the government's declaring Irish waters a whale and dolphin sanctuary. It presents the perfect opportunity to reflect on what the sanctuary means today. What can we and the government do to realise the declaration's full potential? What needs to be addressed and by whom? These questions and more will be raised at a press briefing on Thursday, 7th June in the Mansion House, Dublin at 1.00pm. ■

Annual General Meeting of IWDG

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the IWDG will be held on Thursday, 7th June 2001, in the Mansion House, Dublin at 7.30pm. We will use the occasion to review the year and formally present our new 5-year development plan to the membership for adoption. New board members will be elected and any other business attended to. Any comments on the plan or items for the agenda should be sent to the chairperson. Please contribute: this is your group! ■

5-year Development Plan for IWDG

To fulfill our potential, we have produced a 5-year development plan for the IWDG which discusses the group's aspirations and constraints and its principal objectives for the period 2001-2005. The actions in the 5-year plan are listed in order of priority under the headings: Strandings, Live Strandings, Sightings, Education, Issues, Structure. The full text can be found on the web at: <http://iwdg.ucc.ie/5plan> or from the Secretary. We welcome and encourage any comments/input into achieving this plan. ■

Alex Kingston



Letter from the Secretary

Can you help us with our workload?

Many thanks to all who responded to our membership renewal notices sent out in January, or the final reminders in March. Our membership retention is better than average among our peers. The high renewal rate indicates our approval rating is increasing and we are targeting a membership that better reflects the aims of the group. When I first did this exercise in 1996 we lost over half our members! Membership fees and donations go directly into this publication, which in turn attracts new members.

A member recently voiced the opinion that you don't get much for your fee. Although a lone voice, we take this criticism on board. We now supplement our much-improved newsletter with our regularly updated website (<http://iwdg.ucc.ie>) and group e-mail bulletins. I cannot overstate the importance of e-mail: it is the most effective way of communicating with you (two-thirds of you are e-mail users). So, please advise me once you have e-mail or if you change your e-mail address.

We now have insurance to cover land-based whale-watches and live-stranding exercises, so we hope to get you members more actively involved in field activities.

As with most organisations, about 1% of the group does 99% of the work, which places enormous pressures on us. In our 5-year plan, we decided to set up working groups to address specific issues. With a membership of 300+ (and growing fast) we have a reservoir of financial, technical and administrative talent which remains untapped and could prove invaluable to these working groups. Can you help us by joining one of these groups?

To help boost our resources, we have produced car stickers and attractive brochure/membership forms which we enclose for your use. Please get in touch with me if you feel you can distribute more of these among your family, friends or clubs or at local or national events. Please spread the word by e-mailing us details of those who share our passion for cetaceans and may like to join the IWDG; we will post them out a newsletter. We can only do so much, but we will support those with the enthusiasm to promote local initiatives as best we can.

**Pádraig Whooley
IWDG Secretary**

WHALE DIARY

DIARY OF AN IRISH WHALEWATCHER ● By Pádraig Whooley

Whales and fajitas down Mexico way

Things were looking good in October 2000 on my patch, the Old Head of Kinsale, which had produced fin/sei whales on each of four watches and bottlenose dolphins on the last watch of the month, not forgetting the resident harbour porpoises seen daily. However, things rapidly went downhill as Mother Nature intervened, driving south the mercury in our barometers.

Atrocious weather

Without making excuses... well, cast your minds back to the weather we had in late autumn and the word 'atrocious' will spring to mind. I'm not sure if the Met Office has a term for it, but the celestial powers with responsibility for weather certainly got their scheduling wrong. The result was a year's supply of sou'westerly storms in the run-up to Christmas and I wasn't going anywhere near a headland for fear of losing my life.

The effect of the relentlessly severe weather on my spirits was tempered by the fact that on 6th November I was Mexico-bound. Phoenix, Arizona was to be my rendezvous with Alex, who had just completed five months' travel in south-east Asia and the Antipodes. Little more than a big shopping mall in a vast desert, we were anxious to leave Phoenix and we broke for the border crossing of Nogales, from which we started the 18-hour bus journey south to the Pacific port of Mazatlan. This was as far south as we were to go on the Mexican mainland. After a few days soaking up the sun and gorging on fajitas, we took the 200-mile ferry journey across the wonderful Sea of Cortez (or Gulf of California, depending on how your history books interpret the Spanish annihilation of an entire culture).

Having done some research, it appeared this crossing offered the potential to produce an entire spectrum of toothed and baleen

whales. But our night-time crossing meant we had only three hours of watching time before nightfall and about the same before berthing some 17 hours later in La Paz, the capital city of the Baja (the Californian peninsula).

As we steamed out of port we explained what we were about and got permission to watch from the bridge. As I experienced in Chile, Latin American captains get a kick from dampening tourists' enthusiasm for sea-watching, and ours, having attended the same naval school, was no different. In a very matter-of-fact way he explained to Alex, who speaks fluent Spanish, that we would see no whales. Ten minutes later, I derived great pleasure from handing El Capitan my binoculars and pointing him in the direction of a pod of five rather large whales with which we were on a direct collision course.

Humpback whales

Their 40-50ft frames, arching backs, low, stubby dorsal fins and bushy blows pointed to only one contender and we identified these as humpback whales. This was confirmed by several land-based sightings of humpbacks while driving south to Cabo San Lucas on Baja's southern tip and on each of three watches from the surfing paradise of Todos Santos on the Pacific side, where they approached to within 800 yards of the beach daily.

The intoxicating mix of scenery, people, weather and Baja's wonderful marine wildlife (not forgetting the tequila) guarantees its second-place position on my list of favourite places in the world to visit, second only to our own Cape Clear Island, Co Cork.

Returning home in December with the 'flu, which BA economy-ticket holders got 'on a special,' there appeared to be little change in the weather. This, combined with the Christmas festivities, kept me

"I handed El Capitan my binoculars and pointed him in the direction of a pod of five rather large whales with which we were on a direct collision course"

away from my cliff perch. But in my absence the phone had been ringing off the wall with messages of large whales blowing for days on end in the bays between Toe and Galley Head in west Cork. It seems that the inshore movement of fin/sei whales I documented in 1999 (see Issue No 17) had repeated itself in 2000.

Ballycotton story

While watching from the cliffs at Ballycotton in east Cork on 6th January I got talking to a retired fisherman, Mícheál Sloan, who told me that in the week following Christmas locals watched whales feeding on three consecutive days around the marker buoys known locally as the 'Smiths,' which lie just 500 yards offshore. The accounts of their size and blow type seemed consistent with fin whales. This prompted me to analyse the sighting dates of fin/sei whales in Irish waters in recent years. I found almost 50% of sightings were in the period late October to early January, supporting my opinion that our southern waters are potentially important winter feeding grounds for these large baleen whales.

Mícheál recalled a marvellous story about how, as a young lad in the 1950s, he and his father would scramble up these cliffs in winter with an old pull-out telescope and scan the horizon for the blowing

Humpback whales in the Baja, Mexico



Pádraig Whooley



Photo: Simon Berrow



Photo: Claire Pollock

Above left: Claire Pollock canoeing with a Hector's dolphin. Above right: Hector's dolphin off the Banks peninsula in New Zealand.

'hogs.' On locating the blows, they would direct local fishermen to where they had seen the whales, knowing well that this was where the herring would be. The impact of his story really hit home when 30 minutes later I observed three large whales blowing west of my position. I was left pondering whether these could be the same whales Micheal had seen as a young lad with his father?

Frenzy of dolphins

On 29th January, the Egan family rang to say that, since the weekend, they had been looking at hundreds of dolphins cavorting just outside their house at Fennel's Bay in the mouth of Cork harbour. When I factored in our propensity to exaggerate, I expected the sighting to be somewhat less spectacular in reality, but it wasn't. When I arrived, I found the harbour entrance alive with hundreds of common dolphins feeding and breaching in calm water amidst a flurry of seabird activity.

IWDG member Frances Gallagher, who lives on the Roche's Point side (and has rescued a pilot whale or two in her day from the harbour) had also observed and reported this activity. Over the next month, we observed common dolphins on eight occasions around the harbour mouth and as far upriver as the Whitegate oil refinery and Cobh. This activity peaked on 16th February when I observed a minimum of 500 common dolphins from Fennel's Bay. Given that there were many more dolphins upriver at Crosshaven and their splashing extended well into the mist, beyond which I couldn't see, there could have been upwards of 1,000 dolphins in the area, feeding on sprat.

Was this an annual occurrence, a once-off or another previously unrecorded event which occurs regularly at our doorsteps? That initial phone-call made such a difference and highlights the importance of your participation in the IWDG Sighting Scheme. The message is the same: if you don't look, you don't see and if you don't record what you see, it shall forever remain a secret! ■

- If you have any queries on watching whales, etc, write to Padraig Whooley, 21 Donnybrook Cottages, Donnybrook, Douglas, Co Cork Tel: (021) 489 7312 Email: padwhorca@hotmail.com

Visiting New Zealand's endemic dolphins

Claire Pollock & Colin Barton

When Sam DuFresne replied to our first tentative e-mail with the news that we could be his volunteers in January 2001, it all seemed so very far away. We were working in Scotland and had not yet bought plane tickets to New Zealand. A year and a half later, we're staying in a little cottage overlooking Akaroa harbour on the Banks peninsula just east of Christchurch.

We'll be here for six weeks, helping Sam carry out photo-identification on Hector's dolphins, the smallest marine dolphin in the world, and unfortunately one of the rarest. Found only around the coast of New Zealand, the Banks peninsula is a stronghold of the species and a sanctuary area was designated in 1988, protecting the dolphins within four nautical miles of the coast.

On our first day in Akaroa, bad weather denied us the opportunity to see dolphins. The following day, the 5.30am forecast sounded better and by 6.45am we were launching *Grampus*, the 6m research boat. We headed out to the harbour mouth with the intention of working our way back in, a distance of about six miles. The first sign that dolphins were present was a dorsal fin breaking the surface. The trailing edge of the fin is curved and shaped like one of Mickey Mouse's ears. A quick breath and it was gone, just before two more dolphins surfaced.

These animals move quickly and it takes time to get a good look and appreciate the beauty of their markings. Sam is investigating survival rates in the Banks population. Using photo-ID as a tool, he is expanding on a photographic catalogue of animals with unique markings, such as nicks in the dorsal fin. By adding to this catalogue and re-photographing previously identified animals, he will be able to determine their survival rates and may also discover the sex of different individuals and learn more about their breeding biology.

We run a transect criss-crossing the harbour. We spot fins in the distance and go over for a closer look. Some dolphins leap six feet into the air! They are curious and approach the boat. They like to bowride but prefer the boat to move at slow speeds - just one or two knots and they're happy. Colin drives the boat, being careful not to splash Sam's camera while trying to maintain a

parallel course with the dolphins so that Sam can get a good side-on angle for his ID shots. I log the sighting in a mini-computer, recording group size, whether any calves are present and the current sea conditions. The computer is linked to a Global Positioning System and automatically records our whereabouts on the water. Sam uses this information to locate hotspots for the dolphins. Here, in January, it is the height of summer and the dolphins tend to be found close inshore, often within 800m of the coast. They are calving, and we see several mothers with tiny calves still showing neonatal 'fold' marks on their skin from being in the womb. Often mothers with calves associate with the boat briefly, having a quick look before disappearing. The calves stick very close to their mothers as they zoom away from us through the clear water.

The weather has been fairly unsettled, with fronts regularly blowing up from the south, bringing rolling sea swells and rain. Still, we've managed to get outside the harbour and around the peninsula on several occasions. One of the most memorable trips was along the north coast of the peninsula, where we encountered 185 individuals in one day, mostly in large groups. On that day there was lots of activity, animals jumping clear of the water, rushing at each other and generally enjoying themselves.

It has been a very interesting few weeks, working with Sam. Although there appears to be a healthy number of dolphins in the area, it must be remembered that this species is threatened by man's activities. The population cannot sustain the current level of gill-net mortalities and remain stable. Within the sanctuary, all commercial gill-netting is banned and there are strict guidelines in force for recreational fishermen, who may only set nets at certain times of the year.

While the sanctuary is a step in the right direction, the home range of these dolphins extends beyond the sanctuary limits. In winter, it is thought the animals move offshore, beyond the four nautical miles limit of the sanctuary. The declining north island population, thought to be a distinct subspecies, has yet to receive any protection. Hopefully, information from Sam's PhD and other ongoing research will help protect the smallest marine dolphin in the world. ■

- Claire Pollock is a graduate of UCC who spent four years surveying cetaceans around Ireland for JNCC before heading off travelling with Colin Barton, a keen birder, also formerly of JNCC.

Strandings

NEWS

Cetacean strandings around the Irish coast

Species Focus

Fin whale (Photo: Simon Berrow)

Fin whale

The fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus* can reach lengths of over 80ft and is the second largest living animal on Earth, second only to the blue whale. Fin whales dwarf our most abundant baleen whale, minke, which measures just 30ft.

A brief review of sightings reveals that the fin whale is the most commonly observed large baleen whale in Irish waters. A team of scientists at Cornell University, using American military tracking devices, suggested 300-500 fin whales may live off our west coast.

Although preferring deeper waters along the continental shelf, they can move to within binocular range of our headlands when inshore feeding opportunities occur. Observations reported to the IWDG suggest that early summer (June-July) and winter (November-January) are good times to observe this species from land.

Even at great distances, in calm conditions their robust blow is clearly visible, reaching heights of 20ft. Once this is seen you can rule out the minke whale, whose blow is rarely observed. Their blow is followed by the long roll of the back before the dorsal fin breaks the surface. This classic fin-whale surface rules out the smaller 50-60ft sei whale, whose blow and dorsal fin appear almost simultaneously. Leading authorities who in the past misidentified fin and sei whales learnt the hard way that dorsal fins alone show too much variability and are an unreliable diagnostic feature.

In stark contrast to the often solitary minke, fin whales are generally seen in small pods and this, combined with their shallow dive-pattern when travelling, makes them quite detectable. They may blow several times a minute for a number of minutes before taking a deeper 'terminal' dive. So, even a small pod of five whales may generate 15-20 explosive vapour spouts per minute. If watching from land you should have little problem tracking their movements and once you get a feel for them you will be able to predict with a fair degree of accuracy where and when they are next likely to surface.

Fin whales do not lift their tail flukes when diving, and if 'fluking' is observed it's likely you are watching humpback or sperm whales. If lucky enough to observe the fin whale at close quarters, note the unique asymmetric coloration which results in their right lower lip and mouth cavity, and anterior third of their right-side baleen, being white. ■

Stranded whale ID'd by genetic means

On 25th March, a dead whale, approximately 5m in length and in poor condition, was found near Doonbeg, Co Clare. Although identifiable as a beaked whale, its missing lower jaw prevented us from identifying the species. There are about 20 beaked whale species worldwide, four of which have been recorded in Irish waters.

A skin sample was sent to Merel Dalebout at University of Auckland, New Zealand (www.auckland.ac.nz/), where DNA was extracted from the tissue and phylogenetic analysis conducted to identify the species. The results, when compared with samples from known species, confirmed the animal as being a Cuvier's beaked whale *Ziphius cavirostris*. This is the first time a stranded whale in Ireland has been identified using genetic techniques.

• Source: Berrow, S.D. & Dalebout, M. (in press). Cuvier's whale *Ziphius cavirostris* Cuvier. *Irish Naturalists' Journal*. ■

Pilot whales in Cork

Dúchas ranger Declan O'Donnell and local people refloated two pilot whales live-stranded near Ballydehob, Co Cork on 6th May, only to discover them restranded less than 12 hours later on Hare Island. One died, but locals refloated the remaining whale the following evening. However, on 8th May the whale stranded once again at the original location near Ballydehob. IWDG personnel observed the whale swimming strongly on both the evening of the 8th and morning of the 9th close to the mussel beds at Foilnamuck. Unfortunately, it stranded a third time in the falling tide and died later in the day. The IWDG commend Garda Billy Byrne, Dúchas rangers and all the locals who worked tirelessly over the four days. ■

Dolphins in Mayo

On 13th February, 15 common dolphins live-stranded in Aghleam Bay on the Mullet peninsula. Tony Murray, Dúchas ranger for north Mayo, co-ordinated a successful refloating of eight individuals. Two months earlier, Tony reported two striped and a white-sided dolphin live-stranding on the same day in north Mayo. Clearly the topography of north Mayo contributes to the relatively large number of live strandings in the area. ■

Striped dolphins in Dublin

Dave Wall

On 24th January, a striped dolphin stranded on the mud near East Wall Road in Dublin. The animal showed no signs of malnutrition

but had a wound near its anus. It was decided to move it by boat to Howth for release in deeper water. Before release, I examined the animal: it was a male and relatively young, perhaps 2-3 years of age. I tagged it with a piece of cloth around its tailstock, but it was not seen again.

On 29th January another striped dolphin stranded in Malahide. Fearing it was the same animal, I attended the stranding. However, this animal was a female and perhaps slightly older. She had recently been caught in netting and had lacerations to her underside. Her general condition was good and she had a core temperature of below 40°C. The animal was brought to Howth and, after cloth-tagging, was released in deep water. There were no further reports of this animal. These are the first reported strandings of striped dolphin on the east coast, but there have been UK strandings of this species elsewhere in the Irish Sea. ■

Fin whale in Waterford

Emer Rogan

On 14th February, a live whale stranded at Baile na nGall beach, Ring, Co Waterford. The animal had stranded at low-tide, and local people worked all afternoon, covering it with seaweed to keep it wet and cool. I arrived at dark, the tide had turned and the whale was partly out of water. It was a juvenile, approximately 20ft in length with a few scars and scratches along the edges of the fins, but otherwise in good condition. There wasn't time to do any further assessment as the rising water was the best opportunity to try and refloat it. As the tide came in, the RNLI and local divers manoeuvred it seaward with the aid of straps under the animal. We managed to get the animal off the shore, but unfortunately it swam inshore minutes later and beached again. A second rescue attempt was instigated and this time the animal swam in a steady and strong fashion away from the beach. Since no stranding was reported the following day, it would appear the re-floating was successful. Congratulations are due to the people of Ring, especially the schoolchildren, who worked tirelessly to keep the animal cool - that was the most important job. Which species was it? Well, take a look at the pic - my best guess is fin whale!

• Editor's note: the right lower jaw is white - diagnostic of fin whale. ■

Fin whale live-stranded at Ring, Co Waterford



Cíora Mhic Ghialla Choda

SIGHTINGS

- Cetacean sightings and related news

Close encounters

Sightings

Details of any sightings should be sent to the IWDG Cetacean Sighting Scheme. See back page for details.

Neil Taylor

On 28th September, 1994, while about 180 nautical miles south-south-west of Mizen Head near the continental shelf edge, in very calm conditions with the sails of the yacht *Anjou* flopping around, I was down below when I heard the sound of heavy blowing from up top. I went on deck to find myself surrounded by six or seven black and white whales circling the boat. I couldn't make up my mind if they were killer whales or pilot whales. After a few minutes, I went down below to continue brewing up when suddenly the boat lurched 20 degrees to port after a loud thud on the starboard side. Books, charts and cups went flying. With heart thumping, I shot up on deck to see one of them moving away from the boat to rejoin the group. Thinking they must have just extended an invitation to come out and play, or worse - 'You're invading our space!' - I quickly started the motor and gave her full throttle to put as much distance between us as possible. When at a safe distance, I looked behind to see the culprit standing upright with its head a good metre clear of the water. He could have been making his farewells! Needless to say, I've been wary of whales in close proximity ever since. ■

Exciting porpoises

Nick Channon

On 31st March, while conducting a 'constant effort' watch off Howth Head, I saw two harbour porpoises and it turned out to be a fascinating encounter. One appeared at the surface closer than I had ever seen one before. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary until I saw it had chased quite a large dogfish to the surface. The porpoise was circling it and diving underneath it, blowing bubbles! This lasted about two minutes until a gull, spotting the commotion, flew to the scene and the fish dived out of sight. This observation set me thinking. Why did the fish only swim away when the gull arrived? Was the porpoise playing with the fish, like a cat might play with a mouse (it looked too big to be eaten by a porpoise)? Has anybody else observed similar behaviour? Sadly, there were no

Paddy Crowe



Sandy, the new resident bottlenose dolphin in the Aran Islands, seen here attacking a great northern diver on 12th May, 2001.

other witnesses and of course I didn't have my camera with me!

Editor's note: Harbour porpoises are on Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive and require sites to be designated for their conservation. Isn't it great that this priority species can be seen close to Ireland's capital? The IWDG has suggested Dublin Bay be considered a marine SAC for harbour porpoises. ■

Humpbacks on video

We were fortunate to receive a fantastic video of three humpback whales cavorting around the supporting vessel MV *SeaHorse Supporter* off Kinsale gas field in September 1999. At one stage the undersides of the tail flukes were filmed. The pattern on humpback whale flukes are used for identifying individuals. A copy of the video has been sent to the North Atlantic Humpback Whale Catalogue in Bar harbor, Maine, for matching. If a match is found this will be the first time a humpback whale has been photo-identified off Ireland.

A massive thanks to Eoin O'Mahony of Frankfield, Cork, for this video and all his additional sightings, videos and photographs sent to IWDG. Eoin shows what can be achieved by one dedicated and enthusiastic observer. Cheers, Eoin. ■

Got any video footage?

If anybody has video footage of any species in Ireland, we'd be delighted to receive it as we are producing a video of cetaceans in Irish waters for training and promotion. All contributors will be acknowledged and will receive a free copy of our video.

Whalewatch 2001

IWDG is organising a Whalewatch Day - WHALEWATCH 2001 - on Saturday 4th August (2.00pm to 5.00pm), to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Ireland's whale and dolphin sanctuary. With funding from Patagonia, the clothing company, we will be encouraging people to watch for whales, dolphins and porpoises along their local coastline. The whalewatch locations and leaders will be:

- Old Head of Kinsale, Co Cork - Pádraig Whooley
- Loop Head, Co Clare - Simon Berrow
- Benwee/Kilcummin Head, Co Mayo - Tony Murray
- Ramore Head, Co Antrim - Jim Allen
- Howth Head, Co Dublin - Conal Ó Flanagan

These venues and contacts are provisional and will need to be confirmed closer to the time. ■

Stranding workshop

If you want to organise a live-stranding exercise on behalf of the IWDG, please contact the Secretary, Pádraig Whooley. ■

Publications

- **Shannon Dolphins: a guide to the bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon estuary, Ireland**

By Simon Berrow and Sarah Ferriss
A 32-page full-colour booklet for those interested in learning more about the only known resident group of bottlenose dolphins in Ireland (ISBN 0 9540552). Full of interesting facts and folklore about the dolphins, including frequently asked questions. Published by Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co. Clare. £5.00 incl p&p.

- **Identification poster of whales, dolphins and porpoises in Irish waters**
Available from IWDG Secretary for £5.00 incl P&P.

• **Face to Face with a Beached Whale Guidelines for the Welfare of Live-stranded Cetaceans (27 pages)**
By the IWDG
Available from IWDG Secretary for £3.00 incl P&P. ■

Photo competition

Free poster to the first person who identifies the dolphin in the picture below, photographed by Eddie Dunne on holiday. Note background habitat! The answer to the last competition was common dolphin - but in an anomalously pigmented form. Up to 1995, they were recorded only from New Zealand, Mexico and California, with one stranded in France (Perrin et al, 1995; *Marine Mammal Science* 11(2), 214-247). They are probably more common than this suggests. ■

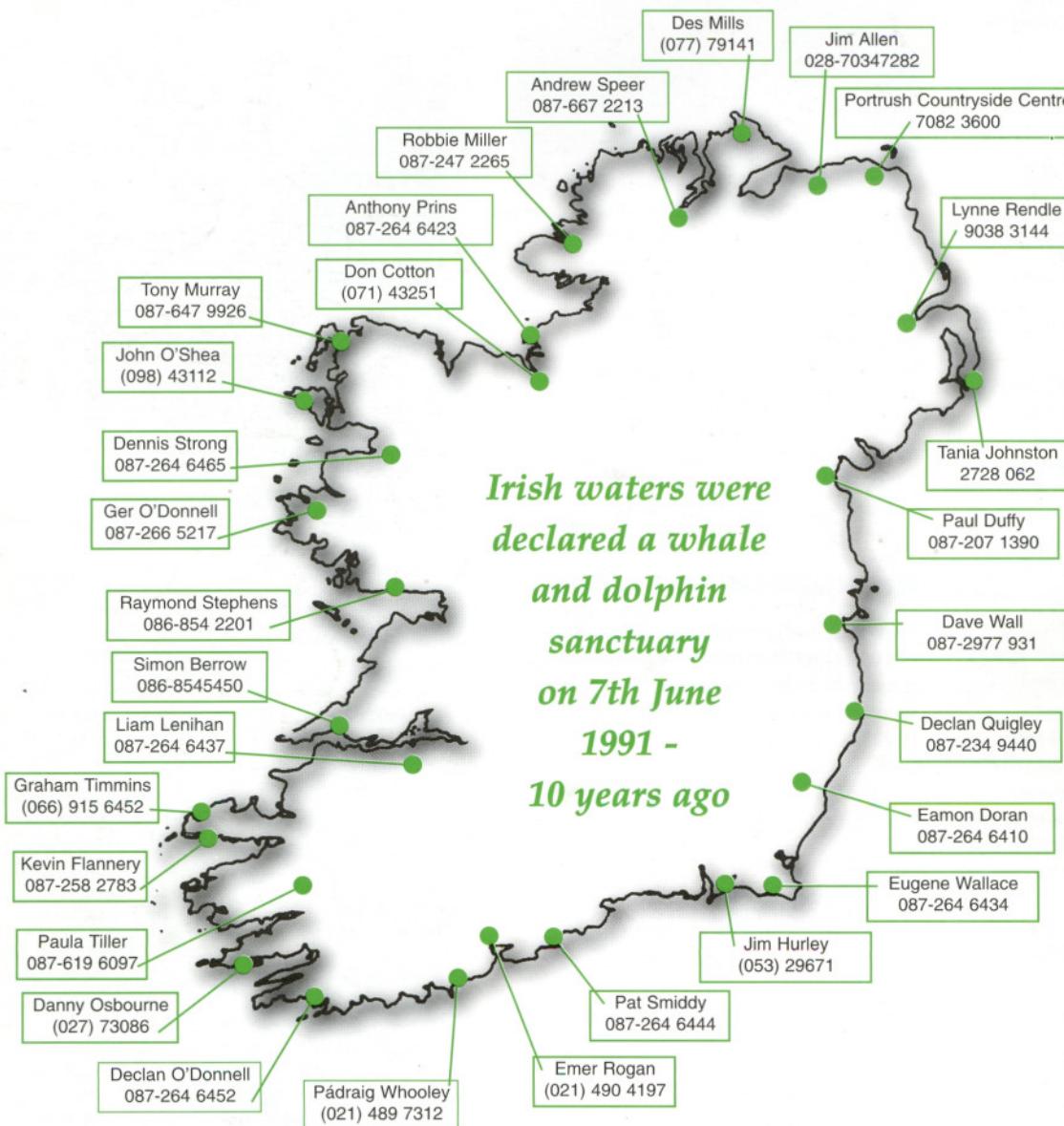
Eddie Dunne



NETWORK

● IWDG contacts around the coast

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group has established a network of contacts who will visit stranded animals and collect records of those sighted at sea. If you find a whale, dolphin or porpoise washed up, or observe one at sea or from the shore, please tell your nearest contact person.



Strandings

Dr Emer Rogan, Dept of Zoology, UCC
Tel: (021) 490 4197 or (021) 490 4053
Mobile 087-699 5314
Email: e.rogan@ucc.ie

Live strandings

IWDG 087-699 5314
086-854 5450
ISS (01) 835 4370
Dúchas (01) 647 2404

Sightings

Dr Simon Berrow,
Merchants Quay,
Kilrush, Co Clare
Tel: (065) 905 2326
Mobile: 086-854 5450
Email:
SDWF@oceanfree.net



IWDG News

IWDG News is published by the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG). You are free to reproduce any of the material contained, but please acknowledge the IWDG.

Text & Editors

Text and editing by Simon Berrow & Pádraig Whooley

Design & page make-up

Cóilín MacLochlainn

Printing

Kilkenny People Printing

IWDG

Official Address

Republic of Ireland:

IWDG, c/o Dept of Zoology and Animal Ecology, University College, Lee Maltings, Cork
Email: IWDG@eircom.net

Northern Ireland:

Lynne Rendle, Ulster Museum, Belfast Tel: 9038 3144
Email: rendle@talk21.com

IWDG Committee

Chairperson:

Dr Simon Berrow
IWDG, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co Clare Tel: 086-854 5450

Secretary:

Pádraig Whooley
21 Donnybrook Cottages, Donnybrook, Douglas, Co Cork
Tel: (021) 489 7312
Email: padwhorca@hotmail.com

Committee members:

Lynne Rendle, Dr Emer Rogan, Dave Wall

Website

<http://iwdg.ucc.ie>

Membership subs

Student/unemployed/OAP: £8
Waged: £15
Family: £25
Corporate: £100
Contact Pádraig Whooley, Secretary, IWDG

Acknowledgements

The IWDG would like to thank Patagonia, Ian Boulton and Epic Design for support with this issue of IWDG News.