

A SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE, (*EUBALAENA AUSTRALIS*), IN HERVEY BAY, QLD AND BALLINA, N NSW. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 51(2): 308. 2005.- In the first half of the 19th century, southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) were heavily exploited (Dawbin, 1986). Right whales were found throughout the Southern Hemisphere between 30–60° S (Bannister et al., 1997; Best et al., 2001), with its first reported Australian whaling in the Derwent Estuary, Tasmania in 1805 (Dakin, 1977). Like many baleen whales, southern right whales feed in high-latitude waters and migrate to warmer waters to breed (Best et al., 1993; Bannister et al. 1997). Southern right whales aggregate close inshore when on the breeding grounds (Burnell & Bryden, 1997; Patenaude, 2002), which made them easy targets for bay whaling. An estimated 26,000+ southern right whales were taken from SE Australia and New Zealand from 1822 (Dawbin, 1986). Peak catches occurred during 1830–1850, followed by a rapid decline in all regions. (Best et al., 2001).

Although right whales were protected internationally in 1935, Soviet whaling expeditions (1951–1972) illegally took at least 3,349 southern right whales (Tormosov et al., 1998; Best et al., 2001). Despite anecdotal evidence of an increase off SW Australia by the mid-1970s, it could only be quantified from 1983 (Bannister, 2001). Significant increases have been reported off South Africa and Patagonia from 1969 and 1971, respectively (Best et al., 2001). The most northerly Australian east coast sighting of southern right whales was just south of Sydney (Bannister, 1986; Dawbin, 1986). Here, we report sightings of the same individual southern right whale in Hervey Bay and off Ballina.

Methods

Our observations were made during field studies of humpback whales. The research in Hervey Bay has been conducted for 10 weeks each year since 1992, during which time southern right whales were seen and photographed on only one other occasion, a mother-calf pair in 2000 (Brigden, 2001). Observations in 2003 were made from a 12-metre power catamaran and photographs were taken with a Canon EOS 10D with a 100–300 telephoto lens. At Ballina in 2003, field surveys were done for 4 days per week for 10 weeks from a 5.8-metre powerboat. Photographs were taken with a Nikon D100 with 70–200 telephoto lens and 1.4X converter.

The whale was photographed (TF) in Hervey Bay on August 25, 2003 at 16:50 at location 25° 05.083' S, 153° 08.252' E. A number of the Hervey Bay whale-watching vessels reported sighting a southern right whale on 23 August and the fleet reported continued sightings during the following 15 days. On 7 September at 16:20 the right whale was resighted and photographed at 25° 00.800' S, 153° 11.332' E with 2 humpback whales. On 15 September, 2003, a southern right whale was photographed (DB) off Ballina at 28° 49.565' S, 153° 36.473' E.

Results and discussion

The right whale was individually identified from natural markings, including callosity patterns, as described by Payne et al. (1983). Comparison of photographs from Hervey Bay and Ballina confirmed that they were of the same individual. In both localities, the whale was within 400m of the coast. The distance between the Hervey Bay and Ballina sightings is approximately 550km.

The northernmost sighting of a southern right whale in east Australia included a mother and calf in Hervey Bay in 2000 (Brigden, 2001). Taken with other recent sightings, these observations suggest that the population may be increasing (Allen & Bejder, 2003). The sightings may also indicate an expansion of the range of *E. australis* off eastern Australia,

which may represent recolonization of breeding grounds used prior to the whaling era. Similar expansions have been documented elsewhere in the Southern Hemisphere (Best et al., 1993; Patenaude et al., 1998).

Allen & Bejder (2003) noted that northerly movement of southern right whales into sub-tropical Australian waters raises issues of risk management similar to those for humpback whales. With their typical coastal behaviour in winter, southern right whales along the NE coast of Australia are at risk of entanglement in shark mesh nets and vessel strike from high vessel traffic.

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