

The return of the harbour porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* to the Belgian part of the North Sea

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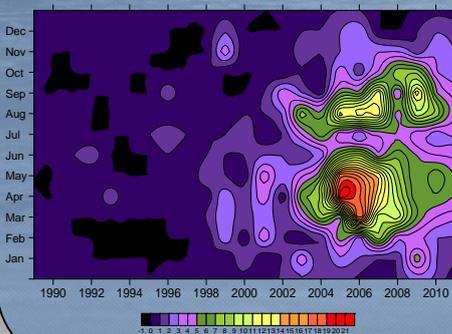
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Introduction

The harbour porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* is our smallest and most abundant marine mammal. To study this elusive creature, we rely on a suite of methods. Results of studies provide the necessary baseline for assessing impacts of human activities, and are indispensable for advising on useful conservation measures taken in the implementation of international marine nature conservation legislation.

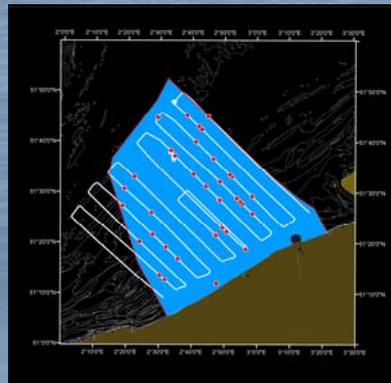
Strandings data

Strandings data indicate general seasonal and annual trends in the occurrence of the harbour porpoise in the southern North Sea. The abundance has increased from the late 20th century onwards, and strandings peak in late spring and summer.



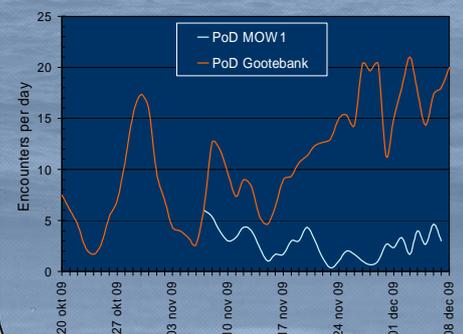
Aerial surveys

Through aerial line transect surveys the distribution and density of porpoises is estimated; they reveal the occurrence of up to 4.000 animals in Belgian waters: 2.5% of the North Sea population.



Passive Acoustic Monitoring

Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) devices allow for a continuous registration of harbour porpoises' presence. They indicate a relatively lower number of porpoises close to the shore vs. further offshore.



Conclusions

The harbour porpoise has returned in numbers to the southern North Sea, including Belgian waters. During the last decade, its occurrence has been clearly seasonal. While porpoises occur throughout Belgian waters during late winter and early spring, they are generally restrained to more offshore and northerly waters during the rest of the year. Given the densities recorded, the harbour porpoise should be appropriately considered in future management plans for the Belgian part of the North Sea.