MAMMALS OF THE 'DEEP': SHIPBASED SURVEYS OF CETACEANS IN THE BELGIAN PART OF THE NORTH SEA (1992-2008)

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In 1992, the Research Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO) started conducting monthly ship-based surveys of seabirds in the Belgian part of the North Sea (BPNS). Apart from seabirds, also sea mammals were recorded during these standardised counts. This dataset allows an effort-corrected analysis of the abundance and distribution of cetaceans on the BNPS. In this 16-year period, 1394 cetaceans, belonging to 4 species were seen. The most abundant species was the Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* with 1259 individuals. This species almost disappeared from our waters in the 1960s and until the end of the 1990s numbers remained very low. From 2000 and even more pronounced from 2004 onward, densities rose steadily, reaching a peak of more than 17 porpoise/100km steamed in 2006. The reason for the rise in numbers is rather a southward shift in distribution of the North Sea population due to lack of food in the region of origin than a rise in absolute numbers. Densities of this species were low from May until November (mean density less than 1 porpoise/100km steamed). Between December and March, more porpoises were frequenting our waters (mean densities 1.5-4.5 porpoise/100km steamed), reaching a peak in April (10.8 porpoise/100km steamed). Despite the huge amount of data, it's still not easy to get a hold on the seasonal distribution patterns of Harbour Porpoise on the BPNS. Other cetacean species were much less abundant. Only White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* was frequently encountered (95 individuals), especially in the deeper zones (e.g. Hinderbanken area). Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* (8 individuals) and Long-finned Pilot Whale *Globicephal melas* (5 individuals) remained quite rare.