

RBINS - OD Nature demonstration of the new Marine Mammal data base www.marinemammals.be

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Marinemammals.be: A resource for marine mammal observations

Did you know that the southern North Sea is home to a number of marine mammals, such as harbour porpoises, white-beaked dolphins, and common and grey seals? Did you know that species occurring in the nearby Atlantic Ocean and the northern North Sea may frequent our waters, or wander into them? Did you know that since historical times, strandings and observations of 19 cetacean and 5 pinniped species occurred at the Belgian coast?

If you did not know, now is your chance to find out all about observations and strandings of marine mammals in the Belgian North Sea. Marinemammals.be is a new website from the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, OD Nature, where you can explore all Belgian marine mammal data: information on sightings and strandings and the results of scientific research on dolphins, whales and seals from Belgian waters. Also some data from neighbouring countries (Northern France, the Netherlands) are taken up in the database.

The Marinemammals.be website was set up as a joint venture between the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS), Operational Directorate Natural Environment (OD Nature), and the Department of Morphology and Pathology of the University of Liège. RBINS is the competent authority in the national legislation that protects marine mammals. The University of Liège executes autopsies of stranded animals.

Collecting data on strandings and sightings of marine mammals is important as such data can provide us with a lot of information about marine mammals, their population trends, problems they face, and ultimately on the condition of the marine environment in general. Until some decades ago, only few data was collected from stranded animals. Nowadays, full necropsies are performed and tissue samples are collected for research purposes. Registered users of the new website can request tissue samples for scientific research purposes.

The site has an open access part of observations and strandings of marine mammals in Belgium. Queries can be made of species, year, circumstances, etc. Pictures and video images are available in some cases. You can also find out what to do when you find a stranded animal on the beach. And if you are interested in the autopsy of the stranded animals, you will find lots of information techniques used.

Belgian Marine Mammal Tissue Bank

The new website also houses the Belgian Marine Mammal Tissue Bank (BMMTB). It was set up in 1990 and originally contained tissue samples from marine mammals washed ashore and bycaught in Belgium. Through collaboration with stranding networks in neighbouring countries, tissue samples from animals that washed ashore in northern France and in The Netherlands were added since 1995. Similar collections exist in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany.

The goal of the BMMTB is to provide high quality tissue samples of marine mammals for dedicated research purposes. This initiative, and similar initiatives in other countries, can allow for more efficient studies of regional and temporal variations in life history, ecology, toxicology and pathology of marine mammals.

The tissues in the BMMTB were collected, fixed and stored according to protocols established by the European Cetacean Society (ECS). They are stored at RBINS in Brussels and Ostend and at the University of Liège, Department of Morphology and Pathology.

You can explore the BMMTB on the same new website and get access to more than 25.000 (mostly) tissue samples taken from marine mammals. Queries can be performed for species, type of tissue,

method of storage, etc., and tissues can be requested. In order to access this page, you need to be a registered user.

The demonstration will show the website marinemammals.be and the Belgian Marine Mammal Tissue Bank. We will bring some skeleton parts of marine mammals that we use for educational purposes.

Keywords: marine mammals; OD Nature; RBINS; database; website; tissue bank