

# Incidents involving Whales in Trinidad waters during 1987.

by Tessa Ottley<sup>1</sup>, Christine Henry<sup>2</sup>, Ahmad Khan<sup>1</sup>, Avril Siung-Chang<sup>1</sup> and Maxwell Sturm<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Marine Affairs, Hilltop Lane, Chaguaramas, Trinidad & Tobago.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Food Production, Marine Exploitation, Forestry and the Environment, Fisheries Division, Chaguaramas, Trinidad & Tobago.

The occurrence of marine mammals in our waters is not uncommon. Porpoises are often seen off Trinidad's north coast and in Tobago waters. Pilot whales were once so abundant in the Gulf of Paria that a whaling station was built at Pointe Baleine on the west side of Gaspar Grande island, where whales were processed for meat and oil. One of the many names given to the Gulf of Paria was Golfo de la Ballena, or Gulf of Whales (Borde 1876 and 1883). At present, however, encounters with whales are fairly rare. It is therefore of great interest that in 1987 three separate incidents involving whales were recorded.

On the morning of June 10th 1987, a killer whale, *Orcinus orca* (Linnaeus, 1758) was landed by a fisherman at the Small boats jetty at Chaguaramas. The whale was identified by its stout conical teeth in both jaws, prominent dorsal fin and distinctive coloration. The fisherman, Kenneth Miller, reported that the whale had become entangled in his drift gill net as it was being hauled in. At the time he was out in the gulf of Paria between Kronstadt and Gaspar Grande islands, in 6-7 metres of water. The victim was a member of a pod numbering about 15. The others in the pod made many attempts to free their trapped colleague, bumping the boat and tugging at the net. It must have been a very frightening experience for those on board the 10 m pirogue. The trapped whale eventually died at around 1.30 a.m. after struggling for more than an hour.

The fisherman towed the carcass ashore where it was examined; it measured about 4.5 metres in length, was female and probably about 8-10 years old (judging from gonad condition). Stomach examination revealed the remains of a turtle. It is of interest to note that the pod remained offshore until around 9.00 a.m., when the fisherman cut up the carcass and removed it from the beach. The Institute of Marine Affairs was keen to acquire the skeleton for their reference collection but the fisherman sold the carcass for quick cash so as to replace the damaged nets.

As far as is known, this is the first authentic record of killer whales in Trinidad waters. Northridge (1984) stated that there had been no report of interactions between killer whales and fisheries in this fishing area (western central Atlantic) and that such interactions were unlikely because of the low density of the species in the area. The incident has been reported to Marine Resources Assessment Group in London which keeps worldwide records of interactions between marine mammals and fisheries.

The killer whale is carnivorous but its reputation as a vicious man-eater is quite unfounded. It is found in all oceans of the world and in some areas such as around Iceland and Norway it has been considered to be deleterious to the stocks of halibut and herring. The populations off Western Canada are well studied; they feed on the salmon as it schools prior to the spawning migration. Individuals have been kept in aquaria and trained to perform tricks.

On May 1st 1987, a pod of whales stranded themselves on a beach at La Filette on the North Coast. They were identified as short-finned pilot whales, *Globicephala macrorhynchus*; Gray, 1846, by the presence of conical teeth in both jaws, the characteristic bulging forehead, the lack of a beak, and the fact that they were found in

tropical waters. The other species of the genus, *G. melaena* (Traill, 1809) is found in the North Atlantic and in the Southern Hemisphere south of the tropics. The pod consisting of 15 adults and two calves was sighted around 5.00 a.m. by fishermen, who then reported the matter to the Institute of Marine Affairs. Research officers from the Institute and from Fisheries Division arrived on the scene around 10.00 a.m. By this time, one of the calves had died. The officers and the fishermen managed to tow the whales back out to sea by tying the flukes to the fishermen's boats with rope and pulling them out. Unfortunately, the other calf and one of the cows died during the attempt. This exercise took several hours. The carcasses were quickly removed for sale.

At around 1.30 p.m. on the same day, a large bull (5 m) beached itself amongst rocks at Blanchisseuse. Two of the Institute's staff got it to return to the sea by prodding it with rods, after which it was not seen again.

On January 23rd 1987, the Institute of Marine Affairs received a report of a dead whale found floating in Pointe-a-Pierre harbour. On the following morning a staff member visited Pointe-a-Pierre where the dead whale had been towed in and secured to a jetty. It was probably a sub-adult male (it was not possible to examine the genital duct), about 7 m in length. The ventral surface which was uppermost was brownish white in colour and the dorsal surface was mottled grey and white. The longitudinal striations in the ventral surface identified the specimen as one of the rorqual whales (*Balaenoptera*). These whales lack teeth but have plates of baleen (the whalebones of the once ubiquitous corsets) hanging from the upper jaw. The baleen plates are used to sift relatively small prey, such as plankton and small fish from the water. This specimen was identified as probably Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni* Anderson, 1878) which is confined to tropical waters. The ventral grooves reaching the navel are also characteristic of the fin whale, *B. physalus* (Linnaeus, 1758) and the blue whale, *B. musculus* (Linnaeus, 1758) but these occur mainly in polar latitudes. Unfortunately it was not possible to examine the specimen for other taxonomic details. Bryde's whale has previously been reported from the Caribbean (Scot-Ryen 1961) and the gulf of Mexico (Rice 1965).

## References

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