

WHALES IN THE ADRIATIC SEA: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

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The Adriatic Sea was inhabited by three marine mammals in the past: the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*), the common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*). Only the bottlenose dolphin has survived in the area while the other two marine mammals are extinct. The Adriatic Sea is connected with the Mediterranean Sea via the Strait of Otranto and several whale species that live in the Mediterranean Sea have been recorded in the Adriatic.

Today all marine mammals that enter the Adriatic Sea are legally protected by international and national laws. In Croatia, a national network of researchers, veterinarians, policy makers and public services has been established to monitor the marine mammals. On one hand their goal is to preserve the last marine mammal species in the Adriatic Sea. On the other hand, they regulate a safe temporary stay of whales coming from the Mediterranean Sea.

The goals of the monitoring program are to gather scientific data on marine mammal abundance and distribution, population size, home range, morphological characteristics, population genetics, causes of death, heavy metal, parasitic burden and anthropogenic influence. Within the monitoring program more than 350 marine mammals have been examined postmortem and several hundreds of survey hours have been spent in the marine mammal habitat. Six whale species have been registered in the Adriatic Sea during the last 28 years of research.

Our research has showed that the bottlenose dolphin is the only mammal in the Adriatic and that the abundance of striped dolphins has increased in southern areas of the Adriatic Sea. The bottlenose dolphin population size in Croatian waters is estimated at 250 animals and some of these 250 have been inhabiting one and the same Adriatic region for more than 10 years. The bottlenose dolphin in the Adriatic Sea is of one and the same morphological type unlike ones in other bottlenose dolphin habitats. The unique morphological characteristics of the bottlenose dolphins in the Adriatic Sea indicate their same hunting and life habits. High genetic biodiversity has been established in the population of bottlenose dolphins in the Adriatic Sea, which in turn indicates they are not isolated from other Mediterranean populations. Intense anthropogenic influence has been recorded and frequent interactions with the fisheries have been observed. Some of those interactions have deadly consequences.

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