

PRELIMINARY POPULATION ESTIMATION OF HUMPBACK WHALES IN NEW CALEDONIA

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Humpback whales, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, have been studied in the waters of New Caledonia in the South West Pacific (22°S, 166°E) since 1991. Aims of the study are to estimate the size of the population, and, to determine whether the whales return to the site year after year. The whales are present only over the winter months, with numbers peaking in July-August. The presence of mother-calf pairings and observations of reproductive behaviour in groups of humpback whales suggests that New Caledonia is a reproductive zone. Of the animals identified in 1996, 19% were re-sightings of animals previously photo-identified, an increase from the 7% re-sighting rate of 1995. This, along with preliminary population estimates, implies that the population is small. A Jolly-Seber estimate for 1995 was 126 ± 77 , while a Petersen Estimate with Chapman modification for the same year was 243 ± 96 .

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Preliminary population estimation of humpback whales in New Caledonia.

In : Marine benthic habitats conference : programme and abstracts.

Nouméa : ORSTOM, 1997, p. 52 multigr.

Marine Benthic Habitats Conference,
1997/11/10-16, Nouméa