

Characteristics of the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) population off the west coast of Scotland

Mandleberg, L.M., Stevick, P., Tetley, M.J., Gaillard, T., Johnston, P.J.

Historically, groups of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) have been reported off the west coast of Scotland. However, despite their documented occurrence in this region, little is known about the frequency of occurrence, population size, range or movements. This study provides a first insight into the distribution and abundance of the bottlenose dolphin population off the west coast of Scotland. Identification photographs were collected between 2001 and 2005 from three sub-regions in the study area (North Skye, Mid-Argyll and South Argyll) covering a distance of approximately 125 nautical miles. Data included a combination of photographs from dedicated surveys and opportunistic encounters from local whale watch vessels. A total of 28 individuals were identified during 27 encounters of which 14 (50%) individuals contained distinctive nicks in the dorsal fin. Ten individuals (all nicked) were identified in more than one year. Movements of individuals extended across the entire study area with 12 (46%) individuals re-sighted in more than one sub-region in the same year and 9 (34%) individuals re-sighted in more than one sub-region between years. The rate of discovery of new individuals was consistent with a low number of dolphins using the area. Together, these preliminary results suggest that the west coast of Scotland is host to a relatively small population of geographically wide-ranging bottlenose dolphins.