

**ASPECTS OF THE ECOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR OF
COASTAL CETACEANS POPULATIONS OF THE
STATE OF ARAGUA, CENTRAL COAST OF
VENEZUELA.**

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As part of an effort to assess the actual status of the Venezuelan cetaceans, Profaua (the Venezuelan Fish and Wildlife Service) is conducting a two-year field research on the State of Aragua, central coast of Venezuela. It is the first step to get a baseline information to devise an action plan for conservation and research on marine mammals. So far, one flight and 24 boat surveys have been made between October, 1996 and June, 1997. During this period, 30 cetacean sightings were recorded over the continental shelf. Relative frequencies were as follows: 50% of Atlantic spotted dolphin (*Stenella frontalis*), 17% of bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), 10% of mixed aggregation of these two species, 17% of unidentified dolphins and 6% of unidentified whales. Group size of *T. truncatus* ranged from 1 to 15 individuals and from 3 to more than 300 for *S. frontalis*. Spotted dolphin showed a sociable behavior by bowriding, escorting and "playing" around the boat between only a few minutes to more than one hour. Bottlenose dolphin, on the other hand, very seldom showed this behavior, being rather shy most of the times. While watching a school of more than 300 *S. frontalis* underwater, 25 animals bowrode and escorted the boat; as the boat reduced the speed while circling the area, they dived to 45-60 feet, looping back to the boat stern and then bowrode again. This behavior was displayed several times and was always made by the same subgroup. In one of the rare occasions when 10 *Tursiops* were bowriding, another school of about 300 *Stenella frontalis* joined them and started bowriding too. Preliminary results suggest the presence of coastal populations of dolphins along the study area during most of the year and, possibly, daily easterly and/or westerly movements (parallel to the coastline). *Stenella frontalis* is the most abundant species in the study area, both in absolute numbers and sighting frequency. Further research will provide information about seasonality of whales presence, as claimed by fishermen. These are preliminary results of Project DLAM 009, funded by FUNDACITE - ARAGUA.

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