

Early sightings of the pygmy killer whale (*Feresa attenuata*) off the Brazilian coast: a correction to Rossi-Santos et al. (2006)

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The pygmy killer whale, *Feresa attenuata* Gray, 1874 can be found worldwide in deep tropical and warm temperate waters remaining one of the least known species of small cetacean. In the tropical and temperate Atlantic, *F. attenuata* has been recorded from south-east United States, Veracruz, Mexico, the Bay of Biscay, Sénégal, the British Virgin Islands, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. A stranding record for Argentina may be considered a vagrant. In Brazil, only two confirmed stranding records are published and sightings are rare. We here report on two early confirmed sightings of pygmy killer whales, *Feresa attenuata* off the Brazilian coast previous to the report of Rossi-Santos et al. (2006). Pygmy killer whales could use the edge of the continental shelf occasionally for resting or feeding, such as several other pelagic species do frequently. In conclusion, *F. attenuata* is known to occur off the Brazilian coast, in deep tropical waters, and may visit the continental slope occasionally for feeding and resting.

The pygmy killer whale, *Feresa attenuata* Gray, 1874 can be found worldwide in deep tropical and warm temperate waters remaining one of the least known species of small cetacean (Nishiwaki et al. 1965; Caldwell & Caldwell, 1971; Ross & Leatherwood, 1994). Sighting and stranding records are relatively scarce in the tropical Indo-Pacific and deserved special attention from several authors (e.g. Pryor et al., 1965; Perrin & Hubbs, 1969; Best, 1970; Ross, 1984; Van Waerebeek & Reyes, 1988; Félix et al., 1995; Chantrapornsy, 1996). The species is classified as 'insufficiently known' by the World Conservation Union-IUCN (Cetacean Specialist Group, 1996). In the tropical and temperate Atlantic, *F. attenuata* has been recorded from the south-east United States (Forrester et al., 1980), Veracruz, Mexico (Delgado-Estrella & Villa-R., 1998; Aguilar-Aguilar & Moreno-Navarrette, 2002), the Bay of Biscay (Williams et al., 2002), Sénégal (Cadenat, 1958), the British Virgin Islands (Mignucci-Giannoni et al., 1999), Guadeloupe (Rinaldi et al., 2006), Puerto Rico (Rodríguez-López & Mignucci-Giannoni, 1999) and Venezuela (Bolaños & Villarroel-Marin, 2003; Bermúdez-Villapol et al., 2006). A stranding record for Argentina (Lichter et al., 1990) may be considered a vagrant. In Brazil, only two confirmed stranding records are published: an emaciated specimen recovered on the coast of São Paulo (Zerbini & Santos, 1997) and more recently, a skull found on the coast of Maranhão (Magalhães et al., 2006). A possible stranding of an alleged 'small blackfish' (i.e. *Peponocephala/Feresa*) on the northern Brazilian coast (Siciliano et al., 2005) as well as incidental captures in gill nets set off northern Rio de Janeiro state coast (Di Benedetto, personal communication) could indicate a regular occurrence of *F. attenuata* in the tropical Atlantic ocean.

Confirmed sightings of *F. attenuata* off the Brazilian coast are rare. This could be related to the species lower abundance or to its morphological similarity with the melon-headed whale (*Peponocephala electra*). It could be particularly difficult to ascertain species identity in the field.

We here report on two early confirmed sightings of pygmy killer whales, *Feresa attenuata* off the Brazilian coast previous to the report of Rossi-Santos et al. (2006).

A cetacean sighting survey conducted off north-eastern Brazil in the winter of 2000 provided the first confirmed sighting of *F. attenuata* for the Brazilian coast. This sighting took place at the peak of abundance of large baleen whales off north-eastern Brazil. It comprised two individuals sighted on 20 August 2000, at 955 m depth, at 8°15'34.4"S, 034°01'52"W. Details of data collected and other cetacean species observed during this cruise are available in Zerbini et al. (2000), Siciliano et al. (2000) and Siciliano (2001).

A second confirmed sighting of *F. attenuata* off the Brazilian coast was recorded during a monitoring programme for cetaceans, seabirds and marine turtles conducted in Campos Basin, south-eastern Brazil, during the autumn of 2001. A group of at least three pygmy killer whales was observed by one of the authors (E.D.S.) from 1650 to 1710 h at 21°53'S 039°49'W on 21 May 2001 at approximately 1500 m depth. The group approached the vessel in a north-east to west direction and was apparently in foraging activity.

The sightings presented here and the record shown by Rossi-Santos et al. (2006) were reported off the north-eastern Brazilian coast, north of Ilhéus (15°S). At such latitude and northwards, the narrower continental shelf may provide suitable environmental conditions for the occurrence of *F. attenuata*, a truly oceanic species. In other words, an oceanic condition is offered for pelagic cetaceans in relative proximity to the coast. Pygmy killer whales could use the edge of the continental shelf occasionally for resting or feeding, such as several other pelagic species do frequently e.g. *Stenella attenuata* in south-eastern Brazil (Moreno et al., 2005). A general picture of the predicted distribution of the pygmy killer whale in Brazil is available in Siciliano et al. (2006) and is reproduced here (Figure 1).

Additionally, it should be noted that the sighting of Rossi-Santos et al. (2006) of a group of pygmy killer whales 'coming to the shore to avoid any kind of disturbance in oceanic waters, such as ongoing seismic work off the Brazilian coast' could be indeed a matter of simple speculation.

In conclusion, *F. attenuata* is known to occur off the Brazilian coast, in deep tropical waters, and may visit the continental slope occasionally for feeding and resting.

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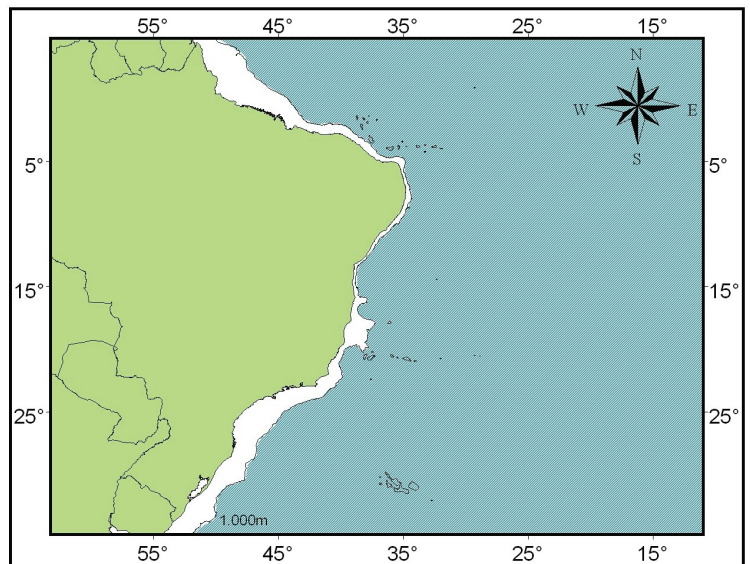


Figure 1. Predicted distribution of the pygmy killer whale (*Feresa attenuata*) off the Brazilian coast. Offshore limits are unknown and are tentatively represented.

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