

PARTIAL ALBINOS AND WHITE BLAZE INDIVIDUALS OF SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALES (*Eubalaena australis*) IN BRAZILIAN WATERS.

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ABSTRACT

Partial albinism (or gray morphs) in southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis* Desmoulins 1822) is not rare in individuals of Argentinean, South African and Western Australian populations. Right whales in Brazilian waters are distributed from southern Rio Grande do Sul state (~ 34°S) to the Arolhos Bank, Bahia state (~ 18° S), during the species breeding and nursing period from June to November. Right whales are common in Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, the main concentration area for the Brazilian population, while more rare in the northern areas. Despite research effort has been directed to the species along the southern Brazilian coast since 1982, including photo-identification studies from 1986 onwards, just recently have the presence of partial albinism come to attention in this area. The first register was of a live calf photographed with its mother in Arolhos Bank (17°55' S, 38°56' W) in October 1999. A second, distinct calf was sighted in August 2000 off Santa Catarina (28°28' S) and then followed and photographed during 45 days, providing information on behavior and movement patterns. The only previous record of an albino right whale along the Brazilian coast was based on a photograph of a dead calf stranded off Rio Grande do Sul in 1982. White blaze animals were also recorded during ongoing studies along Santa Catarina coast: one calf in 1987, one calf in 1999 and two adults in 2000. The actual frequency of partial albinism, white blaze individuals and animals with white ventral patches should be evaluated through the analysis of the photographic catalogue in the Brazilian population and compared with the data from others breeding/calving grounds. These analyses in conjunction with underway genetic studies could help to understand the relationship among the different South Atlantic right whale populations.

Anomalously white cetaceans have been recorded in 20 species (Hain and Leatherwood 1982, Fertl *et al.* 1999), seeming relatively common in the southern right whale, *Eubalaena australis*, populations (Schaeff *et al.* 1999). Dorsal skin color patterns in *E. australis* also include white-blaze, gray-blaze, gray-and-white-blaze and the typical black (Best 1990, Payne *et al.* 1983).

Although *E. australis* is common in southern Brazil (especially Santa Catarina coast) with some occurring in southeastern and very few on northeastern (around Arolhos Bank) (Fig. 1), no records or comments on the occurrence of partial albinistic animals have been made (Pinedo and Castello 1979, Lodi *et al.* 1996, Simões-Lopes *et al.* 1992, IWC/Brazil 1999, Groch 2000, Greig *et al.* 2001, Santos *et al.* 2001). Here we present information on partial albinistic animals as well as gray-blaze and white-blaze individuals in the coast of Brazil.

Three partial albinos have been recorded (two in southern Brazil, Figs. 2A, B and D, and another in northeastern, Fig. 2C), covering roughly the whole distribution of the species in Brazil (Fig. 1). A higher number of white-blaze (Fig. 2E) and gray-blaze (Figs. 2B and F) were observed but only in Santa Catarina, where photoidentification from aerial surveys, land based observations and boat surveys

including biopsy efforts have been conducted since 1987. This season of 2001 another partial albino, two white-blaze and two gray-blaze individuals were seen in Santa Catarina.

While for two partial albino calves no information is available, one partial albino calf was born from a gray-morph mother (Fig. 2C). The total number and proportion of individuals with dorsal skin color patterns is still under analysis (KRG Ph.D. thesis), together with genetic evaluation might help us to enlighten the relationship of Brazilian right whales to other populations in the Southern Hemisphere.

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