

USING PLATFORMS OF OPPORTUNITY TO VALIDATE ADEQUATE ROUTE FOR BARGE TRAFFIC IN THE BREEDING GROUND FOR HUMPBACK WHALES ALONG THE BRAZILIAN COAST

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Ship traffic is currently a potential threat to the conservation of large whales throughout the world. Increased coastal navigation of large ships along the Brazilian coast is concerning. Since 2002 barges transporting eucalyptus have been crossing the Abrolhos Bank, an important breeding ground of humpback whales in Eastern Brazil. A company established a route (1) from Belmonte (Bahia State) to Barra do Riacho (Espírito Santo State) aiming to avoid the Abrolhos Marine National Park area and without a previous study of cetacean distribution. Differently, based on three years of aerial survey results, Instituto Baleia Jubarte (Humpback Whale Institute - Brazil) suggested a navigation corridor from Caravelas to Barra do Riacho to be used by the barges of Aracruz Celulose S.A. (route 2). The Brazilian Environmental Agency (IBAMA) requested a study with the objective of monitor possible impacts to cetaceans along both routes. Results of the first year are presented. Although route 1 was monitored for only 4 days in the peak of the 2003 breeding season (September) relatively high encounter rates were registered, 313 humpback whales were sighted along 204 nautical miles (0.049 to 2.31 humpback whales/nautical mile) confirming that this area presents a high density of whales. On the other hand route 2 was monitored for 108 days from July to November 2003 and 587 humpback whales were sighted along 6190.8 nm. In this route sightings peaked in September and were concentrated in the northern portion near the 20m isobath. Encounter rates for each month were: 0.035 in July, 0.055 in August, 0.089 in September, 0.080 in October and 0.012 in November. These results indicate that route 2 might be an adequate route in terms of minimizing the impact of vessel traffic and vessel noise in areas of higher density of humpback whales. This monitoring will continue and shows that partnerships between companies and environmental research groups can provide important insights into the sustainable coastal use and management.

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Key words: encounter rates, Abrolhos Bank, humpback whales, platforms of opportunity.