

**European Community Directive
on the Conservation of Natural Habitats
and of Wild Fauna and Flora
(92/43/EEC)**

**Second Report by the United Kingdom under
Article 17
on the implementation of the Directive
from January 2001 to December 2006**

**Conservation status assessment for
Rare and uncommon cetacean species**

Please note that this is a section of the report. For the complete report visit <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/article17>

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Rare and Uncommon Cetacean Species

Cetaceans are very mobile and, as marine animals facing little in the way of geographical barriers, individuals can range over large distances. For almost all cetacean species, the animals found in UK waters are part of a much larger population or populations whose range extends beyond UK waters into the waters of other States and/or the High Seas. Of the 28 cetacean species recorded from UK waters, 21 are considered to be uncommon, rare or very rare in occurrence. As there are few sightings or stranding records of these species, it is not possible to ascertain their conservation status.

S1348 *Eubalaena glacialis* Northern right whale

Eubalaena glacialis was once widely distributed in the northeast Atlantic, including waters around western Scotland, the North Sea and the English Channel, but centuries of whaling drove it virtually to extinction by the middle part of the 20th century. *E. glacialis* was still present in Scottish waters in the early 20th century; 94 were taken by the whaling station in the Outer Hebrides and six in Shetland between 1906 and 1923.

A small population of around 300 animals persists in the northwest Atlantic (Knowlton *et al.*, 1994; Perry *et al.*, 1999). The population status in the eastern North Atlantic is unknown (Reid *et al.*, 2003). Rare sightings are made in European waters from Norway to Spain and the Canaries, and particularly to the west of Britain (Map 1; Reid *et al.*, 2003). It is unclear, however, if these individuals represent wanderers from the western population or a remnant eastern population (Clapham *et al.*, 1999; Perry *et al.*, 1999), as one individual is known to have moved from the east coast of the USA to northern Norway and back.

UK records include sightings in September 1974, approximately 600km west of Scotland (Evans 1992), May 1979 in the northern Irish Sea (Evans 1992), August 1980 Outer Hebrides, Scotland (Evans 1992), June 2000 Hatton Bank, north-west of Rockall (Evans *et al.*, 2003) and July 2000 north of Shetland (Evans *et al.*, 2003).

S5020 *Balaenoptera musculus* Blue whale

Balaenoptera musculus is the largest cetacean and it is also one of the most widely distributed, being found worldwide from polar to tropical seas, usually in deep waters. Blue whales are generally thought to breed in warm temperate and subtropical waters in the winter and then migrate northwards to cold temperate and polar seas (Yochem & Leatherwood, 1985; Perry *et al.*, 1999). The North Atlantic population was severely depleted by whaling in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the northeast Atlantic, distribution appears to be centred around Iceland where numbers are estimated at around 400 individuals. Whaling records show that blue whales were present in UK waters at the beginning of the 20th century; from 1903 to 1928, 310 were taken by whalers from the Outer Hebrides and 85 from Shetland.

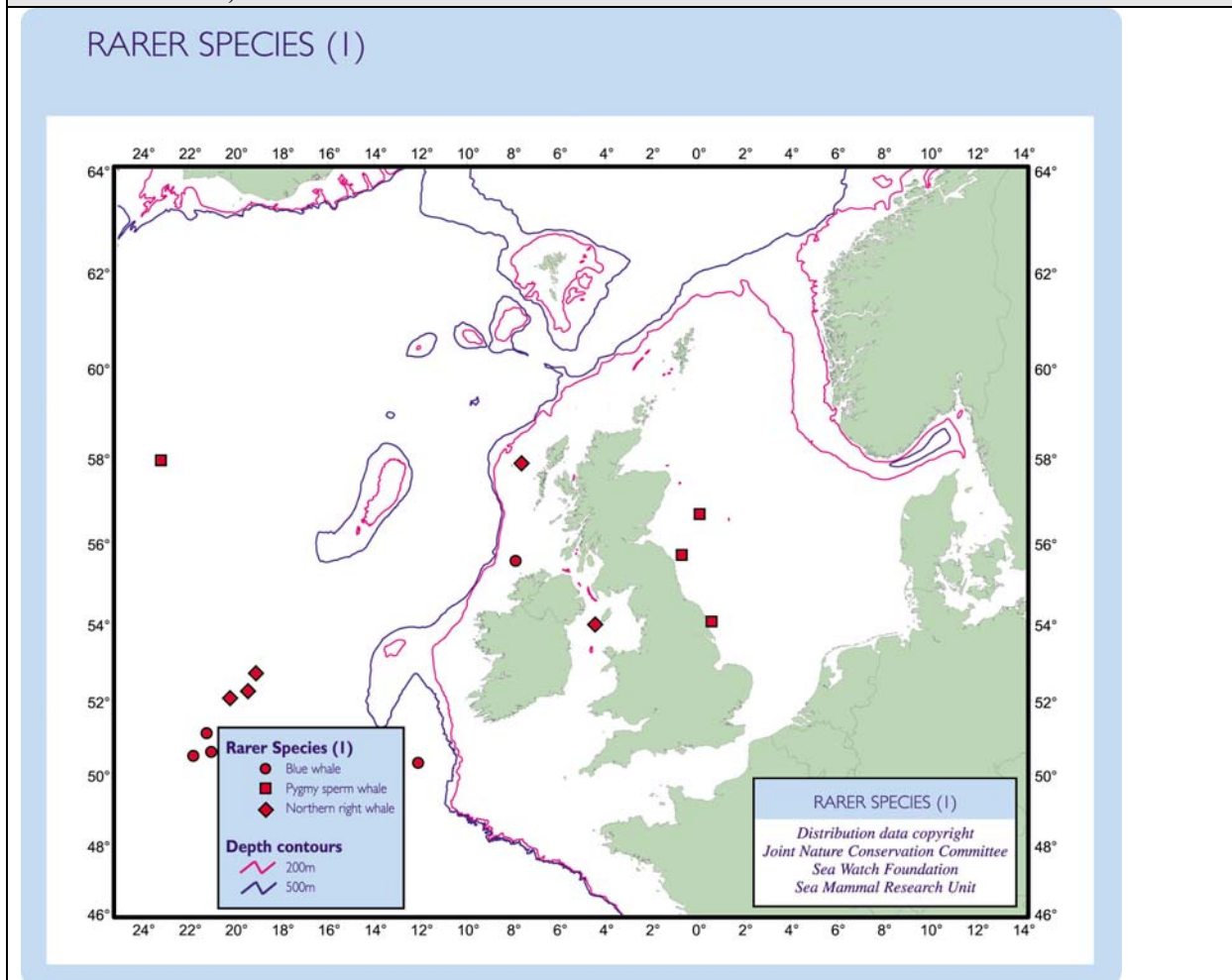
Currently there are no population size estimates for this species, although the population is thought to be small (Clapham *et al.*, 1999; Perry *et al.*, 1999; Reid *et al.*, 2003). 203 individuals have been identified in the western North Atlantic (Sears *et al.*, 1990) and 442 in Icelandic waters (Gumlangsson & Sigurjónsson 1990; Sigurjónsson & Gumlangsson 1990). This species is a rare visitor to UK waters, most recently being recorded in deep waters in the Faroe-Shetland Channel and the Rockall Trough (Map 1; Charif & Clark 2000; Pollock *et al.*,

2000). Acoustic monitoring to the west of the European continental shelf has indicated a peak occurrence during November and December (Charif & Clark 2000).

S2622 *Kogia breviceps* Pygmy sperm whale

Kogia breviceps has a worldwide distribution in deep waters (possibly most common just off the shelf break) from temperate to tropical regions. There have been few sightings in European waters, mostly from the Bay of Biscay to west of Ireland, but also one in the North Sea off Northumberland (Map 1). A small number of stranded animals have also been recorded from Spain to western Ireland, including nine in the UK, mostly in the late 1990s and all on western coasts (Evans *et al.*, 2003; Jepson 2006).

Map 1. Distribution of rarer cetacean species in north east Atlantic.
From Reid *et al.*, 2003.



S1345 *Megaptera novaeangliae* Humpback whale

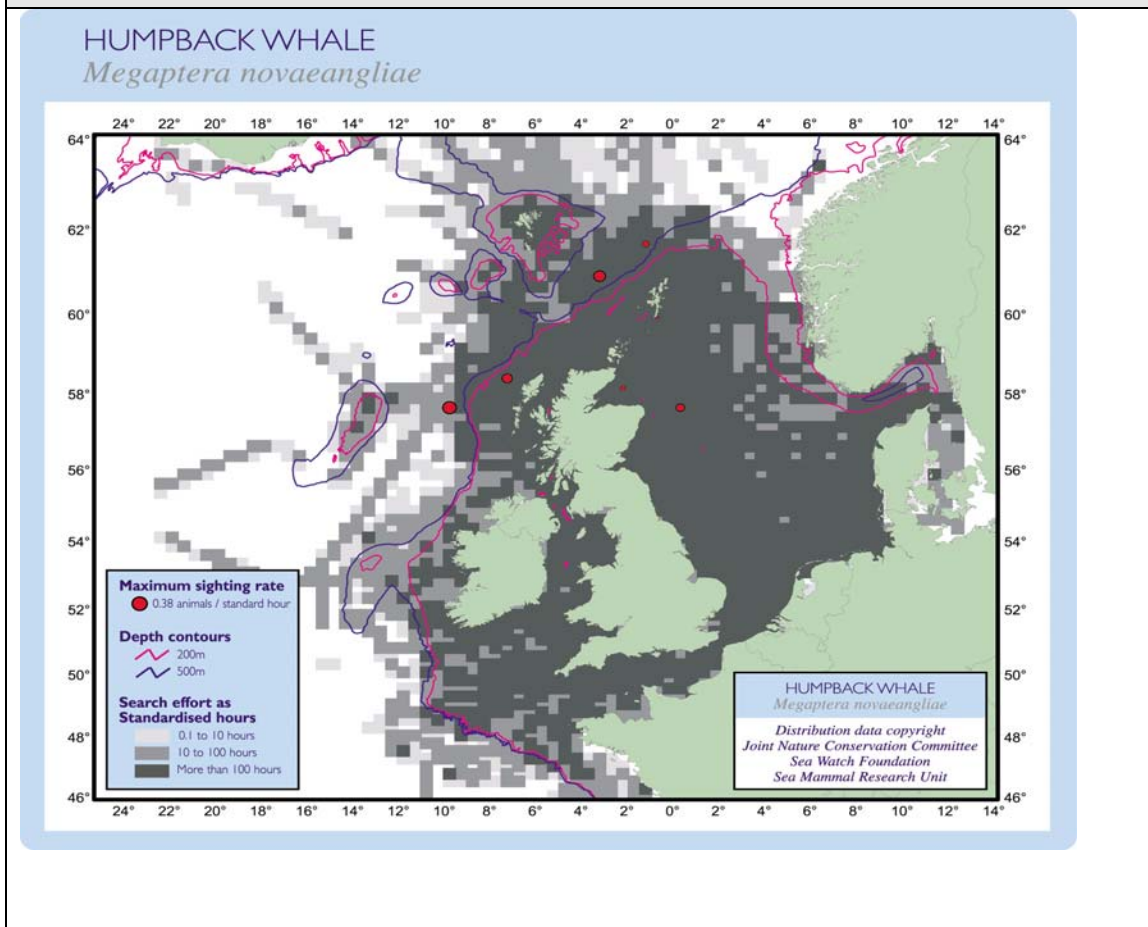
Megaptera novaeangliae is widely distributed globally from polar to tropical seas. It is a highly migratory species, feeding at high latitudes in the summer and moving to lower latitudes to breed in warmer waters in the winter. In the northeast Atlantic there are feeding areas around Iceland (14,000 individuals estimated in 2001) and Norway (600 individuals).

Historically there was an important breeding ground around the Cape Verde Islands, but few humpbacks are found in this area now. It is known that some, and probably most, of the whales from Icelandic and Norwegian waters migrate to the breeding grounds in the West Indies, along with those from feeding grounds in the Northwest Atlantic. Deep waters beyond the continental shelf to the west of Britain probably form part of the migration route.

M. novaeangliae is regularly recorded by acoustic monitoring between November and March, mostly from north of Scotland to west of Ireland, and less frequently to the southwest of the British Isles (Clark & Charif 2000). Sightings of the species usually come from waters >200m to the north and west of Scotland (Pollock *et al.*, 2000). In the summer, a few *M. novaeangliae* are found in British shelf waters, particularly around the Northern Isles and also in western areas from the Hebrides to the English Channel (Map 2; Reid *et al.*, 2003; Sabin *et al.*, 2004). Elsewhere in the world, humpbacks occur regularly in shelf seas.

Populations in the North Atlantic (and elsewhere) were severely depleted by whaling, with the largest numbers taken during the 19th century. There are now signs that populations are recovering in the northwest Atlantic and around Iceland. Numbers of sightings in UK inshore waters have been increasing (nine sightings in 1980s, 54 in 1990s, though it is likely that some of this increase is due to an increase in time put into observation). Two strandings were recorded in the 1980s, two in 2001, and two in 2004 (Jepson 2006).

Map 2: Distribution of humpback whales in north east Atlantic.
From Reid *et al.*, 2003



S2619 *Balaenoptera borealis* Sei whale

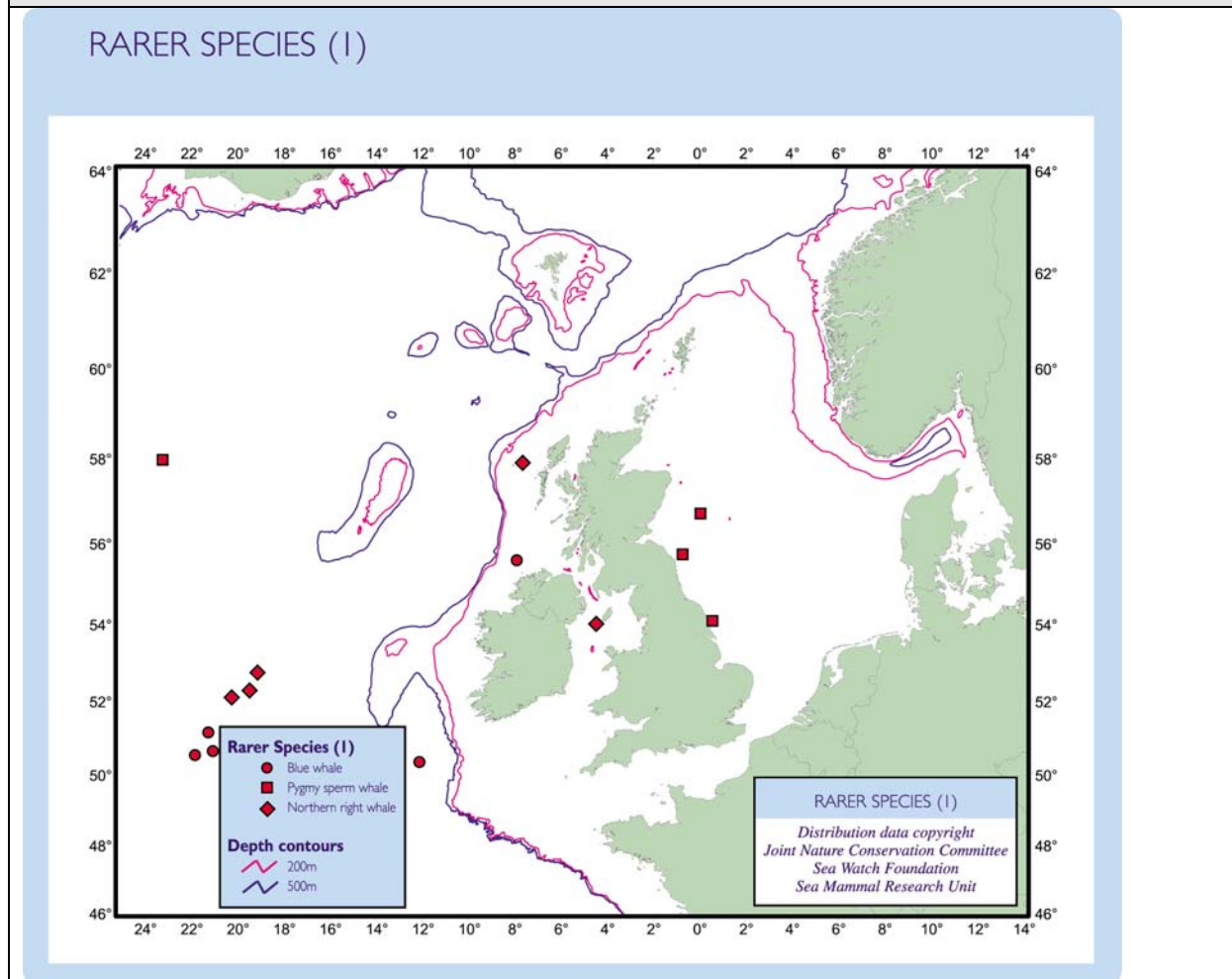
Balaenoptera borealis is a very widely distributed species, found from polar to subtropical seas in both hemispheres, especially in deep temperate waters. *B. borealis* in the North Atlantic tends to winter in warm temperate and subtropical waters and migrate northwards in the summer to cold temperate and polar seas (Reid *et al.*, 2003). This species was hunted extensively in the eastern North Atlantic in the 19th and 20th centuries, and abundance significantly depleted. For example, 13.2 whales taken per catcher boat per year from 1903 to 1920 whilst between 1922 and 1929 this had dropped to 3.2 *B. borealis* per boat (Brown, 1976).

No current population estimates exist for *B. borealis* in the North Atlantic although sightings surveys undertaken in the late 1987 and 1989 indicate a possible abundance of 13,500 individuals (Cattanach *et al.*, 1993). The sei whale is often difficult to distinguish from the more numerous fin whale at sea, so could be under-recorded. However, *B. borealis* tends to be found further offshore than fin whales, in water depths of 500m to 3000m (Horwood 1987; Reid *et al.*, 2003). Their migration route is thought to pass along the edge of the continental shelf to the west of Britain and Ireland (Evans 1980). All data sources indicate that there are high inter-year variations in occurrence of this species.

In UK waters, this species is most frequently recorded in the Faroe-Shetland Channel and adjacent waters, also occasionally in deep waters west of Scotland, but only rarely in shelf waters of western Britain (Map 3). *B. borealis* is mainly observed north and west of Scotland between May and October, although sightings have also been made in the south western approaches, between Ireland and south west England (Pollock *et al.*, 2000). Whaling records from the early 20th century show a similar seasonal pattern, with most catches made along the shelf edge from June to August. From 1903-1928, 1839 sei whales were taken in Shetland and 375 in the Outer Hebrides.

There have only been 13 strandings in the UK since 1913, the most recent occurring in 2001 (Jepson 2006).

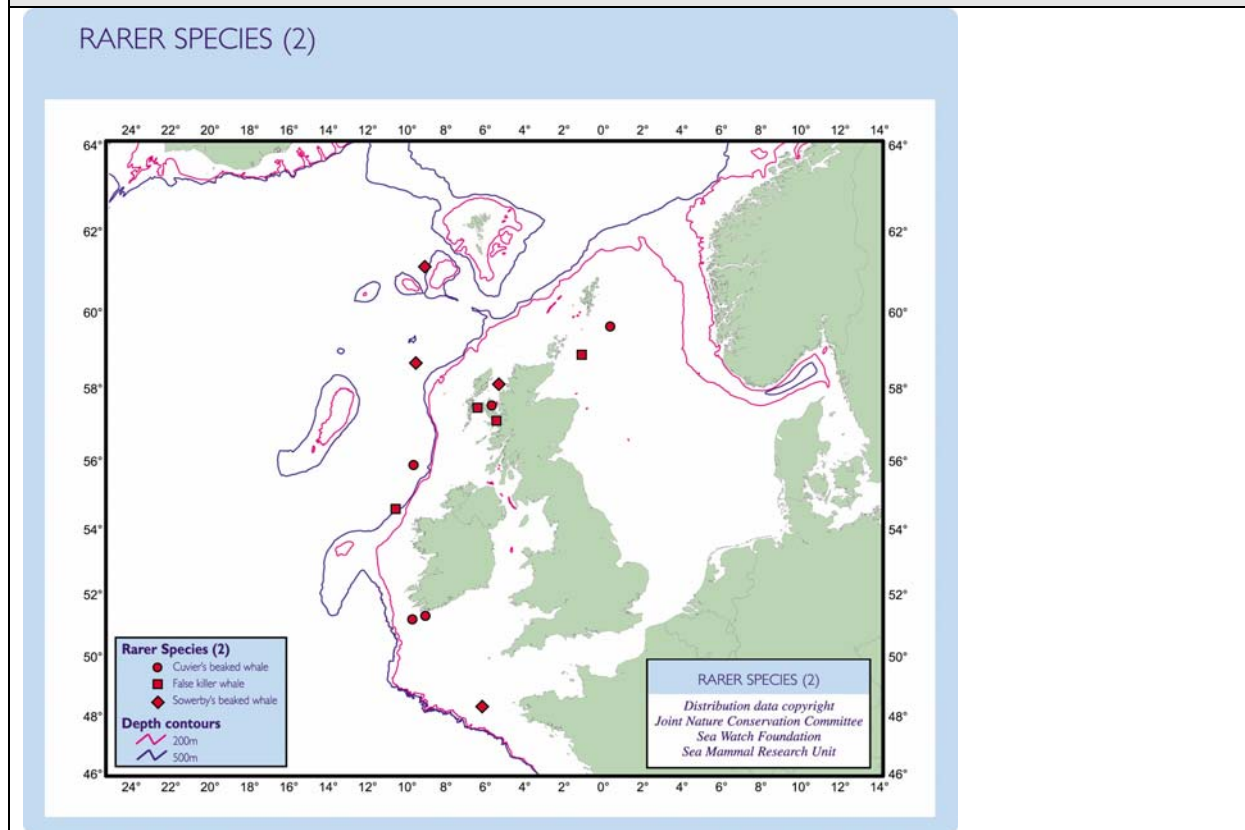
Map 3: Distribution of *B. borealis* in north east Atlantic.
From Reid *et al.*, 2003..



S2035 *Ziphius cavirostris* Cuvier's beaked whale

Ziphius cavirostris is one of the most widespread and abundant of the beaked whales, found in deep waters from the tropics to cold temperate waters worldwide. In the northeast Atlantic, this species is frequently recorded in the Bay of Biscay and further south, but there have been only two confirmed sightings in UK waters (off west Scotland and in the northern North Sea) and four off western Ireland, all in summer (Map 4; Reid *et al.*, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2003). Between 1993 and 2004, there have been 12 strandings, occurring almost annually and mostly on the Outer Hebrides (Jepson 2006).

Map 4: Distribution of rare whales in north east Atlantic.
From Reid *et al.*, 2003..



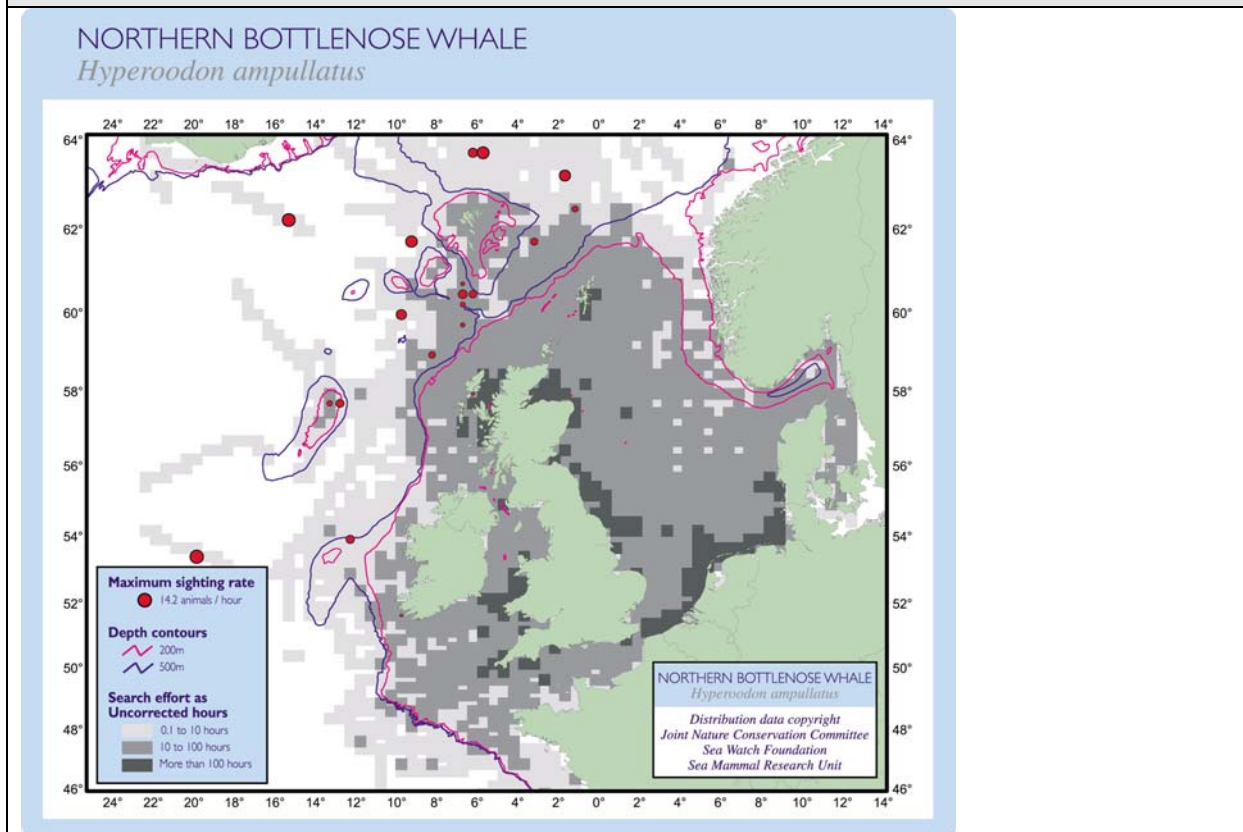
S5033 *Hyperoodon ampullatus* Northern bottlenose whale

Hyperoodon ampullatus is found only in the North Atlantic, where it occurs from arctic to temperate waters but is most numerous at high latitudes and usually found in deep water. The population size, estimated at around 40,000, was reduced by whaling, which continued up to the 1970s (Reid *et al.*, 2003). Only small numbers of this species were taken by Scottish whalers, mostly from Shetland (25 from 1903-1928).

Around the UK, *Hyperoodon ampullatus* is recorded infrequently, mostly beyond the shelf edge to the northwest of Scotland (Map 5; Reid *et al.*, 2003; Weir *et al.*, 2001; Stone 2003). This species is thought to migrate north in spring, returning south in autumn and most sightings in UK waters have been during the summer months. However, in Faroese waters, where peak sightings and catches also occur in late summer, the species is known to be present throughout the year (Reid *et al.*, 2003).

The stranding rate in the UK declined from the first half of the 20th century to the second half, but in the last few years has been similar to the earlier period. Between 1993 and 2004, there have been 14 reported strandings (Jepson, 2006).

Map 5: Distribution of *Hyperoodon ampullatus* in north east Atlantic. From Reid *et al.*, 2003.



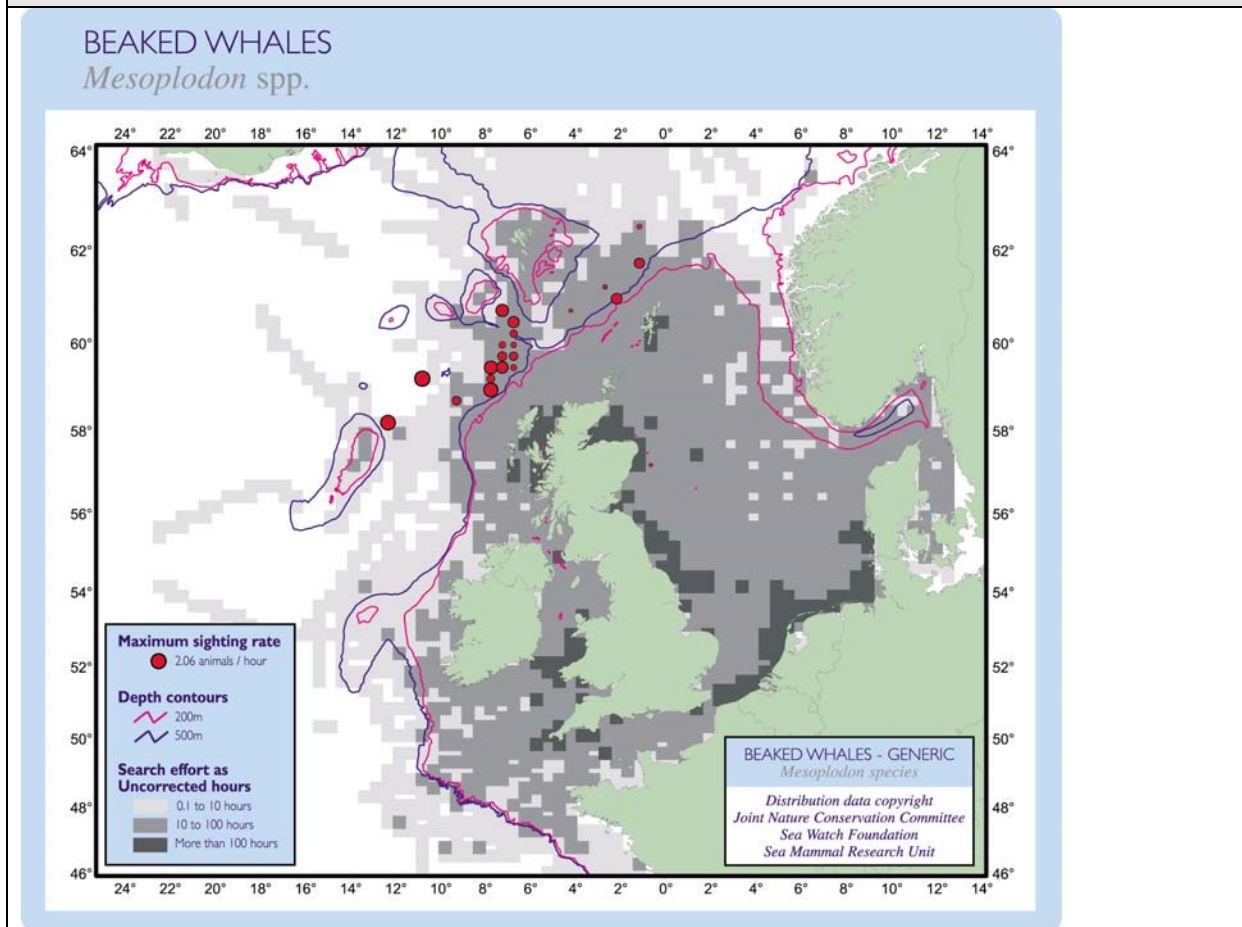
S2038 *Mesoplodon bidens* Sowerby's beaked whale

Mesoplodon bidens is only known from the North Atlantic, where it is found in warm and cool temperate waters, with a more northerly range than other species of the genus (Reid *et al.*, 2003). It appears to be the commonest *Mesoplodon* species in the northeast Atlantic, being the most frequently seen and stranded. There have only been a few confirmed sightings in UK waters, all in western areas, but it seems probable that most sightings of unidentified mesoplodonts were of this species (Maps 4 and 6). These records are mostly from deep water just beyond the shelf edge, to the northwest of Scotland (Reid *et al.*, 2003; Stone 2003). There is no data on population size or trends, but the frequency of strandings around the UK has remained fairly constant. Between 1993 and 2004, there were 18 reported strandings (Jepson 2006).

S2037 *Mesoplodon mirus* True's beaked whale

Mesoplodon mirus is found in warm temperate waters of the North Atlantic and also in the southern hemisphere. This poorly known species had not been identified at sea until 1995, but in recent years there have been a few probable and confirmed sightings in the northeast Atlantic (off the Azores and in the Bay of Biscay) (Reid *et al.*, 2003). There have been several strandings on the west coast of Ireland and one in the Outer Hebrides. Since 1993, there has been no recorded stranding of this species (Jepson 2006).

Map 6: Distribution of *Mesoplodon* spp. in north east Atlantic.
From Reid *et al.*, 2003.



S5034 *Mesoplodon europaeus* Gervais' beaked whale

Mesoplodon europaeus has rarely been identified at sea and is known mainly from strandings. It is found in warm temperate and tropical parts of the Atlantic, particularly the western North Atlantic. In the northeast Atlantic there has been one confirmed sighting off the Canaries in 1998. There have been no records in UK waters since the type specimen was found dead in the English Channel in 1840, the nearest records being one stranding in Ireland in 1989 (Berrow & Rogan 1997) and another in southern France in 1999.

S2625 *Mesoplodon densirostris* Blainville's beaked whale

Mesoplodon densirostris, probably the most widely distributed species of *Mesoplodon*, is found in tropical and warm temperate waters (Reid *et al.*, 2003). In the Northeast Atlantic, where it is less common than in the west, most strandings and the few sightings have been well south of UK waters, although there has been one stranding in Iceland as well as the one UK record from Wales in 1993 (Reid *et al.*, 2003; Jepson 2006).

S5029 *Delphinapterus leucas* Beluga (white whale)

Delphinapterus leucas is an arctic species, which occurs only rarely in temperate waters. Between 1903 and 1997, there have been 16 sightings in UK waters, mostly around northern Britain and in the North Sea (Evans *et al.*, 2003).

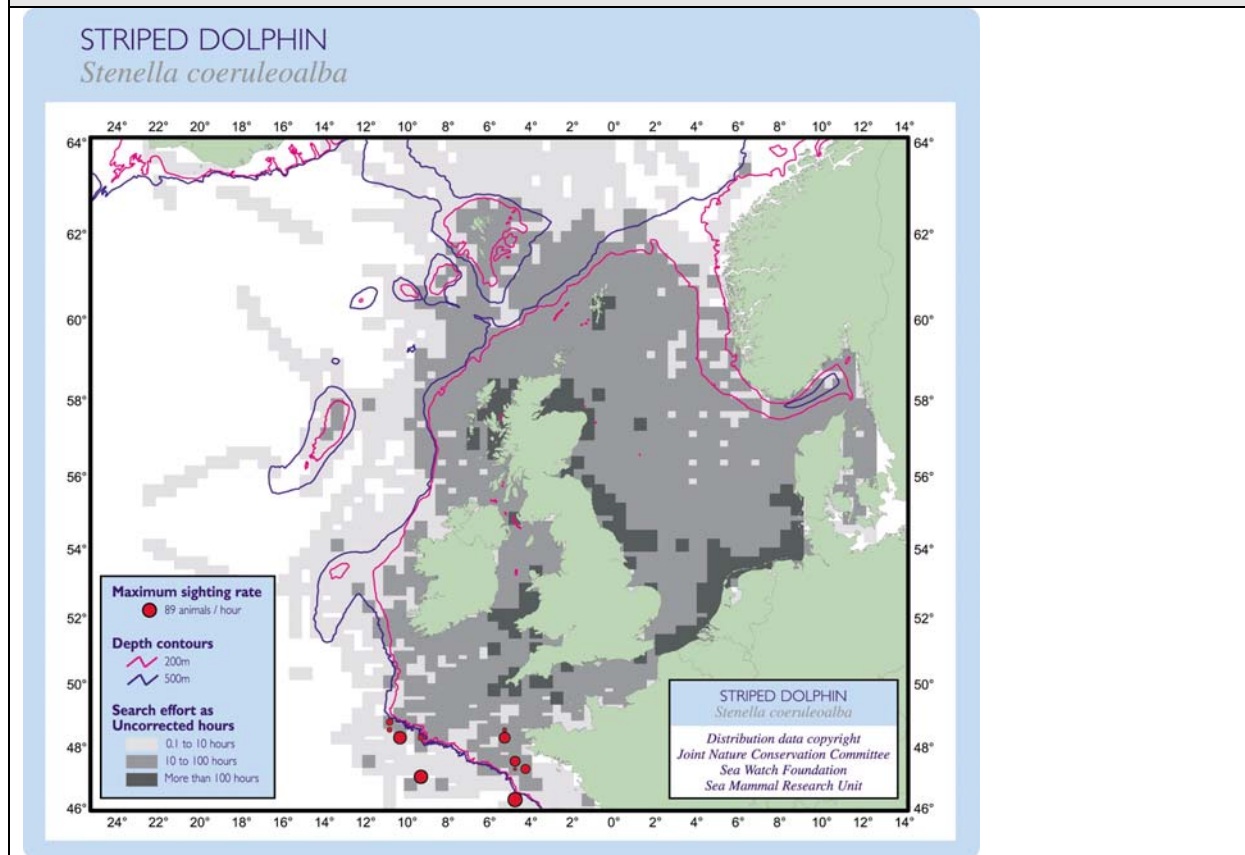
S2626 *Monodon monoceros* Narwhal

The only UK records of this arctic species are a sighting off Orkney and a further two strandings in the Thames Estuary, all in 1949 (Evans *et al.*, 2003).

S2034 *Stenella coeruleoalba* Striped dolphin

Stenella coeruleoalba is an offshore species found worldwide, mainly in tropical and sub-tropical seas, but also in warm temperate waters. In the northeast Atlantic it is found mainly in the Bay of Biscay and west of the Iberian peninsula and is also common in the Mediterranean. The UK is at the northern limit of normal distribution and most sightings in British waters are in the southwest approaches with occasional records from deep waters west of Britain and further north (Map 7; Reid *et al.*, 2003; Stone 2003). An increase in sightings and strandings in the UK and Ireland since the 1970s and 1980s suggests that the species' range is extending northwards (Berrow & Rogan 1997; Muir *et al.*, 2000; Evans *et al.*, 2003; Jepson 2006). Between 1993 and 2004, between four and 17 individuals were reported stranded on an annual basis with peaks in the late 1990s (Jepson 2006). From post mortem results undertaken between 2000 and 2004, the main causes of death were live stranding (27.3%), infections (21.2%) and bycatch (15.2%) (Jepson 2006).

Map 7: Distribution of *Stenella coeruleoalba* in the north east Atlantic. From Reid *et al.*, 2003.



S2028 *Lagenodelphis hosei* Fraser's dolphin

Lagenodelphis hosei has a worldwide distribution in tropical pelagic waters. In the North Atlantic, it occurs around the Azores and Canaries, but there have been no live sightings further north (Reid *et al.*, 2003). There has been one UK record; a stranded animal in the Outer Hebrides in 1996 (Jepson, 2006).

S5024 *Peponocephala electra* Melon-headed whale

Peponocephala electra has a worldwide distribution in deep waters of the tropics and subtropics. A skull found in Cornwall in 1949 is the only UK and only European record of this species (Reid *et al.*, 2003).

S2028 *Pseudorca crassidens* False killer whale

Pseudorca crassidens is widely distributed, but nowhere abundant, in tropical, subtropical and temperate seas, usually in deep water. In the northeast Atlantic, most records are from the Bay of Biscay and further south.

There have been five sightings in UK waters, between 1976 and 1991, all between July and November (Evans *et al.*, 2003). These were mostly around northern Scotland, including a large pod of 100-150 whales east of Orkney in 1981 (Map 4). There were three mass strandings of this species between 1927 and 1935, but there have been no strandings since (Reid *et al.*, 2003).

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