

SIGHTINGS OF FRANCISCANA DOLPHINS (*PONTOPORIA BLAINVILLEI*) OFF ESPÍRITO SANTO, BRAZIL

Ignacio B. Moreno^{1,2,*}, Cristiane C. A. Martins³, Artur Andriolo⁴ and Márcia H. Engel³

The franciscana dolphin, *Pontoporia blainvillei*, is distributed in coastal waters of South America, from Itaúnas (18°25'S; 030°42'W), Espírito Santo State (ES), Brazil (Siciliano *et al.*, 2002) to Golfo Nuevo (42°35'S; 064°48'W), Argentina (Crespo *et al.*, 1998). Two populations have been recognized based on morphology and genetics (*e.g.* Pinedo, 1991; Secchi *et al.*, 1998). Discontinuities in franciscana distribution have been observed between Regência (19°40'S) and Barra de Itabapoana (21°18'S) and between Macaé (22°25'S) and Ubatuba (23°18'S) (Siciliano *et al.*, 2002). However, more recently Azevedo *et al.* (2002) reported the collection of franciscana specimens in the area of Ilha Grande bay (*ca.* 23°10'-22°59'S) and northern São Paulo State (23°22'S). These gaps split the species into two, possibly small, isolated populations in northern Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and Espírito Santo (ES). The reason for these hiatuses is unclear, but Siciliano *et al.* (2002) proposed that water transparency and depth were among the possible causes.

This note reports on sightings of franciscana dolphins in northern Espírito Santo (Figure 1). They occurred on 06 September 2003 during an aerial survey to estimate humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) abundance and distribution in Brazilian waters. The aircraft was adapted with

one bubble window on each side, flown at a height of 152m with a constant relative speed of approximately 90 knots. The sea state was 3 in the Beaufort scale, the visibility was good and the water was turbid. At 12:44pm one individual of *P. blainvillei* was observed at 19°40'16.98"S; 039°44'38.17"W and few seconds later another group with four animals was sighted at 19°40'17.70"S; 039°43'43.40"W on the same side of the plane by the same observer. Both sightings were made on effort at 217m away from the trackline. In order to resight the groups, the transect line was abandoned and the aircraft returned to the first sighting position. Three other groups, one of ten and two of three animals, were observed at 19°40'03.60"S; 039°43'46.69"W. However, some individuals could belong to the first two groups sighted before. No apparent reaction to the airplane and no calves were observed. The sightings were made about 6nm from shore, approximately to the 20m isobath and were near the southern range of the supposed isolated population of northern ES. The sighting area is very close to the Doce River mouth and is strongly influenced by its turbid waters. This is in agreement with the overall description of habitat preferences for this species (Bordino *et al.*, 2002; Siciliano *et al.*, 2002). Sightings of franciscana throughout most of its range are uncommon, possibly due to its small body

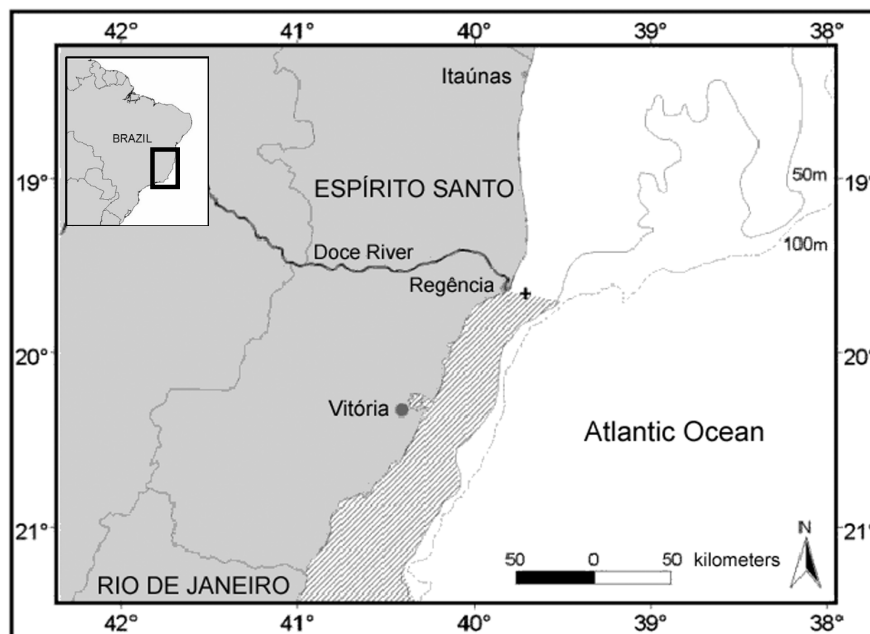


Figure 1. Sightings locations (+) of *Pontoporia blainvillei* in Espírito Santo State. The shaded area corresponds to the northern hiatus in the distribution of the franciscana, proposed by Siciliano *et al.* (2002).

¹ Grupo de Estudos de Mamíferos Aquáticos do Rio Grande do Sul (GEMARS). Rua Felipe Neri, 382/203, Porto Alegre, RS, 90440-150, Brazil.

² Centro de Estudos Costeiros, Limnológicos e Marinhos (CECLIMAR – UFRGS). Av. Tramandaí, 976, Imbé, RS, 90690-000, Brazil.

³ Projeto Baleia Jubarte/Instituto Baleia Jubarte. Praia do Kitongo, s/n, Caravelas, BA, 45900-000, Brazil.

⁴ Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Instituto de Ciências Biológicas, Departamento de Zoologia. Juiz de Fora, MG, 36036-330, Brazil.

* Corresponding author, e-mail: igmoreno@terra.com.br.

size, the turbidity of the water and the species tendency to avoid engine-powered boats (Crespo *et al.*, 2002). Although franciscana group size tends to be small, ranging from 1 to 6 animals (Bordino *et al.*, 1999; Secchi *et al.*, 2001), groups of 10 to 17 individuals have been recorded throughout the species range (Crespo *et al.*, 1998; Bastida *et al.*, 2000; Flores *et al.*, 2000; Di Benedetto *et al.*, 2001). Franciscanas are systematically seen only in few areas, namely the Bahia Anegada, in Argentina (Bordino *et al.*, 1999) and Baía da Babitonga, in Brazil (Bordino *et al.*, 2002). This is the first sightings record of *P. blainvillei* off Espírito Santo. The use of an airplane at low speed and adapted with bubble windows seems to be feasible to conduct surveys since in the present study franciscanas were easily observed and identified with confidence even in turbid waters.

The sightings reported here were seen near the southern range of the population of northern ES. In this area, to date, very few strandings or incidental captures have been recorded (n=14, from 1984 to 1994, Siciliano *et al.*, 2002). More recently, a non-systematic study carried out from 1994 to 2001 along the ES coast failed to record any franciscana carcass (Freitas Netto and Barbosa, 2003). Despite the scarcity of records between 1984 and 1994 and the absolute lack of records in the last nine years (1994 to 2003), the opportunistic sightings reported in this note raises the issue that this potentially isolated population deserves special attention for research as virtually nothing is known about its biology and conservation status. Even though interactions with fishing activities do not seem to occur in large scale, other sources of potentially harmful anthropogenic activities are increasing in the region, in particular cargo ship traffic and oil and gas exploitation. Ramos *et al.* (2002) recommended to consider franciscanas from northern Espírito Santo as a discrete population for management purpose.

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