

## First report of a minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata* Lacèpède, 1804) in Hellenic waters

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On 23 May 2000, tourists found a dead whale floating off the northeastern coast of Skiathos Island (NW Aegean Sea, approximately 23°31'E, 39°11'N), Northern Sporades, Greece. The specimen was hauled into Skiathos Island's main harbor. The local port-police authorities contacted the field team monitoring the Mediterranean monk seal population in the adjacent National Marine Park of Alonissos, Northern Sporades. The field team arrived on site and examined the specimen externally.

The condition of the carcass, in relation to the relative high ambient temperature of this season, indicated that the animal was dead for no longer than 2–3 days. Photographs of the dead animal were taken and the following morphometric measurements were conducted:

Snout to fluke notch:	4.16 m
Snout to tip of dorsal fin:	2.76 m
Snout to blowholes:	0.60 m
Snout to anterior insertion of flipper:	1.25 m
Flipper length:	0.55 m
Flipper width (maximum):	0.18 m
Fluke width (maximum):	1.00 m

The specimen was identified as a subadult male minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), based on size, its flat head, the sharply pointed rostrum with a single central ridge, its cream baleen plates, and the broad white band on its flippers, all characteristics of the Northern hemisphere populations of this species (Figures 1 and 2). A corroded fishing hook (typical for long-line sword fishing in Greece) was found attached to the animal's body. In addition, the posterior half of the lower body had a number of deep (approximately 2 cm), not bleeding sharp cuts (Figure 1). The above findings indicated that the whale possibly was entangled in abandoned long-lines. However, such material itself was not found attached to the carcass. No necropsy was conducted and the actual cause of death was not determined.

Taking into consideration that surface currents in the area are of north-south direction, it is plausible, that the animal died north of Skiathos Island, in an area where water depth reaches 1000 m and large cetaceans (mainly sperm whales) are often sighted by fishermen. This area is also used for long-line swordfish and tuna fishing.

Up to now, ten cetacean species—nine odontocetes and one mysticete—have been observed in Hellenic waters (Frantzis, 1997; Frantzis *et al.*, 1998). Seven of them (*Stenella coeruleoalba*, *Tursiops truncatus*, *Delphinus delphis*, *Grampus griseus*, *Ziphius cavirostris*, *Physeter macrocephalus* and *Balaenoptera physalus*) occur regularly, whereas *Phocoena phocoena* and *Pseudorca crassidens* have been observed rarely. A floating carcass of *Mesoplodon bidens* was recorded once (Frantzis *et al.*, 1998).

There was no evidence of the minke whale in the Eastern Mediterranean basin until recently. Indirect evidence from two individuals stranded in the Black Sea in 1880 and 1926 (Marchessaux, 1980) presupposed the passing of the animals through the Aegean Sea. However, these two cases were then considered exceptional. It is worth noting, that a minke whale calf, identified through DNA analysis, was captured in gill nets off Northern Israel in May 2000 (Goffman *et al.*, 2000).

The status of minke whales in the Mediterranean basin remains quite uncertain (Marchessaux, 1980; Beaubrun, 1995). Minke whales have been recorded almost exclusively in the Western Mediterranean (UNEP, 1994), where the species is possibly an occasional visitor from the North Atlantic. During the 20th century, sightings or strandings have been reported from: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, Corsica, Tyrrhenian coasts, Sicilian Channel, Ligurian Sea in August 1986 and April 1987 and continental France in December 1982 (Duguy *et al.*, 1983; Giordano, 1988; UNEP, 1994; Di Guardo *et al.*, 1995), whereas reports from the Adriatic Sea (Rallo, 1979) were doubtful, because the species was possibly misidentified (Notarbartolo



**Figure 1.** Photograph (23/05/2000) showing the ventral view of the minke whale. The specimen was found dead floating off the northeastern coast of Skiathos Island, Greece. The arrows indicate the position of the deep cuts found on the body of the animal. (Photo P. Dendrinis/MOM.)



**Figure 2.** Photograph (23/05/2000) showing the dorsal view of the minke whale taken during its transportation. (Photo P. Dendrinis/MOM.)

& Bearzi, 1992). The presence of minke whales in Hellenic waters could be accidental or indicate a previously unknown feeding area for some members of this species.

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