

Distribution of harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in the south of Portugal

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Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is listed in the Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive, which considers it a priority species for conservation and, thus, requires the creation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in European waters. There is little information about the occurrence and distribution of this species in mainland Portugal. Most of the knowledge comes from stranding information. Additionally, during the 2005 SCANS – II project no sightings of harbour porpoises were made in the southern coast of Portugal, and only a few sightings were registered in the northwestern part. In 2009, the occurrence of this species was registered for the first time during the first survey of cetaceans undertaken in the most western part of this coast, around the region of Sagres. The aim of this study was to model the presence of harbour porpoises along the south coast of Portugal, from Sagres to Tavira. From June to October 2010, whale-watching boats were used as platforms of opportunity for data collection. Information on group size and cohesion was collected. A total of 40 sightings of harbour porpoise were recorded and their distribution was modelled using generalised models to test whether differences in depth, slope, and distance from the coast line were influencing the occurrence of harbour porpoises in the study area. In 100% of the sightings the groups were considered very compact (< 1 body length). Group size varied from 1 to 8 individuals. All the animals were observed in shallow waters (up to 162 meters) and close to shore, on average at 5 nautical miles from the coast. These results suggest that this area might be important for this species and that further work should be carried out to be able to propose a SAC within the area where the species is targeted by whale watching boats.