First photographed observation of the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in Svalbard

Morten Joergensen
Broagergade 1, 3.th. 1672 Copenhagen V, Denmark

Received October 2006
doi:10.1017/S0032247406236064

ABSTRACT. The first photographed observation of the harbour porpoise in Svalbard is reported. The harbour porpoise is not normally found in the high Arctic as it is a temperate and sub Arctic species, the nearest frequent location for the species being the north coast of Norway.

This note reports the first photographed observation of the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in northern Svalbard. In 2004, reliable sightings were secured of a single harbour porpoise in front of the Monaco glacier in Liefdefjord on the northern coast of Spitsbergen, the largest island of the Svalbard archipelago (79° 33'N, 12° 29'E). This is a location rich in wild life because there is upwelling of nutrient rich water immediately at the glacier front. The individual was reported as being in company with a pod of beluga (*Delphinapterus leucas*). However, no photographs were secured (C. Lydersen, personal communication, October 2006).

On 31 July 2006, while conducting a zodiac cruise from the vessel *Professor Multanovskiy*, and at exactly the same location, the author observed a single harbour porpoise. Good views were secured of this animal as it approached the boat closely (Figs. 1, 2, 3). The identification of species is certain. The harbour porpoise is a small cetaecean, perhaps 1.5 m long and weighing 60–75 kg. It has a compact body, very short beak, short dark flippers and dark tail. The dorsal side dark grey to blackish, fading into lighter grey body sides, fading again into pale cream to whitish belly side. The mid-body dorsal fin usually small and triangular, and can be slightly falcate. The animal moves fast creating a small bow wave, and surfacing frequently but each time briefly. It is a northern hemisphere animal and is normally found in temperate and sub Arctic waters in the Atlantic as well as in the Pacific. It is mostly coastal (as the name implies), being found in bays, estuaries, fjords and inshore along coastlines. It is common in the eastern sector of the North Atlantic including in Scandinavian waters and the north coasts of Norway and Russia (Reeves and others 2002: 460–463).

The animal was observed for approximately 5–10 minutes. The significance of this observation, and that of 2004, is that the nearest common location for the harbour porpoise is the northern coast of Norway, some 525 nautical miles (975 km) to the south. Haug and others (2003) note sightings in the Barents Sea, north of Norway at approximately 70 °N while Bjorge and Oien (1995) note a previous sighting at 77 °N to the west of Spitsbergen, Svalbard. However, these are the first sightings on the northern coast of the archipelago.

Fig. 1. Rear view of harbour porpoise. The zodiac provides an approximate scale.

Fig. 2. Lateral view of harbour porpoise.

Fig. 3. Front view of harbour porpoise.

Acknowledgements

The author is very grateful to C. Lydersen of the Norwegian Polar Institute and to Sinéad Murphy of the University of St. Andrews for information concerning the occurrence of the harbour porpoise in the north Atlantic.

References

Bjorge, A., and N. Oien. 1995. Distribution and abundance of harbour porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* in Norwegian waters. *Report of the International Whaling Commission* (Special Issue Series 16): 89–98.

Haug, T., G. Desportes, G.A. Vikingsson, and L. Witting. 2003. Harbour porpoises in the north Atlantic. NAMMCO Scientific Publications Vol. 5.

Reeves, R.R., B.S. Stewart, P.J. Clapham, and J.A. Powell. 2002. *Sea mammals of the world*. London: A&C Black.

A further note on the *Belgica* project

Walter Loy
Vorsink 21, B 9450 Haaltert, Belgium

Tony van Autenboer
Vijverstraat 17, B-2800 Mechelen, Belgium

Received October 2006
doi:10.1017/S0032247406246060

ABSTRACT. Further progress is reported concerning the preservation of *Belgica*, currently a wreck in Norwegian waters. A plan is currently being developed for furthering this aim.

In the previous issue of this journal, a report was presented concerning the *Belgica* Society, a body recently established with the aim of preserving the wreck of *Belgica*, and to examine the possibilities of the recovery and restoration of this famous vessel (Loy 2006).

A delegation from the society visited Norway in August 2006 in order to investigate the state of the wreck and to initiate discussions concerning the legal and administrative problems surrounding the possible recovery of the ship. As reported by Kjaer (2005), the vessel now lies in Norwegian territorial waters near Bruvik having been sunk in the Norwegian campaign of 1940. She still has on board the British explosives that she was then transporting. The wreck is protected under the Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act and official authorisation is required for any operations to take place on it. Through the Belgian Embassy in Oslo, the society established contacts with the Directorate of Cultural Heritage and with the Royal Norwegian Navy, which has responsibility for the clearance of mines and explosives in Norwegian waters.

During the course of discussion, it became clear that salvage would only be permitted if a comprehensive plan of action was submitted to, and approved by, the Directorate. This would require a detailed description of the relics, the possibilities of raising them and, very specifically, the best way in which to preserve them. Of particular importance is the proposed method of treating the wooden structures. It would also require a financial plan in which there would be guarantees that the relics would be preserved for the future. No problems are anticipated relating to the removal of the explosives. Very great interest is being shown in this matter by the present owner of the vessel, Kristian Holst, whose family has owned it since 1918, and by the local community, especially the Harstad diving club, the participation of which has been invaluable.

A detailed description of the wreck with a full photographic record has been made. It is in very poor condition and a comparison with a film made by members of the diving club some ten years ago shows very rapid deterioration. Prompt action is therefore crucial. It is also clear that some metallic items (propellers, anchor, capstan, etc.) would be easy to recover, but little is known about the state of the remaining oak structures. How best to preserve the wood remains a major uncertainty.

At a meeting of the *Belgica* Society in October 2006, it was decided to present a two-tiered programme to the Directorate. The first part of the programme would comprise a more detailed archaeological examination of some parts of the vessel, the recovery of those parts that are directly accessible and that do not demand further evaluation for their preservation, and a more detailed study of, for example, the state of the oak ribs and the method of conservation.

The second part of the programme would depend on the results of the detailed study. A more difficult problem presents itself later. This relates to the question of where to store/exhibit the remains of *Belgica*, the possibilities including an already established museum or a new purpose-built one.

It is obvious that the close collaboration already established between Belgium and Norway is essential to the success of the salvage and conservation of these relics, which are a most important part of international polar history.

References

Kjaer, K. 2005. *Belgica* in the Arctic. *Polar Record* 41(218): 205–214

Loy, W. 2006. The *Belgica* project. *Polar Record* 42(223): 368.