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Status Report of Conservation and Research on the western North Pacific Gray Whales in Japan, May 2020 - April 2021

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ABSTRACT

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) adopted Resolutions 2001-3, 2004-1 and 2005-3 on Western North Pacific gray whale's conservation and research. On a voluntary basis, this paper presents Japan's information on conservation and research on the western gray whale for the period from May 2020 to April 2021, which is relevant to those resolutions. Neither sightings nor anthropogenic mortality due to entanglement or other causes have been reported from the coast of Japan during the period investigated. On research, one old skeletonized remain was found and collected from the coast of Hokkaido prefecture, and it is under study.

KEYWORDS: GRAY WHALE; INCIDENTAL SIGHTINGS; STRANDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Several resolutions on research and conservation of Western North Pacific gray whale have been adopted by the International Whaling Commission (IWC). IWC Resolution 2001-3, which *inter alia* called on range states and others to actively pursue all practicable actions to eliminate anthropogenic mortality and minimize anthropogenic disturbance to the western gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) population; IWC Resolution 2004-1, which *inter alia* called upon range states to develop or expand national monitoring and research program on western gray whales; and IWC Resolution 2005-3 supports further efforts to conserve this population. Under such circumstances, and as response to those IWC Resolutions, Japan has provided its annual scientific reports on the western gray whales from 2005 to 2020.

At the 68a meeting of the IWC Scientific Committee (IWC SC) in 2019, Japan expressed its intention to continue contributing with scientific information even after its withdrawal from the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) in June 2019, and consequently Japan voluntarily provided its progress report on western North Pacific gray whales at the 68b meeting of the SC in 2020.

The present report provides information on gray whales in Japan for the period from May 2020 to April 2021. All the known records of the western gray whale around the Japanese coasts since 1955 to date are given in Table 1.

SIGHTINGS

Systematic sightings

Murase *et al* (2021) reported that no gray whale was sighted in the Central North Pacific, north of 40°N to 52°N, between 160°E and 180°E (high sea), during the systematic cetacean sighting survey conducted under the 2020 IWC-Pacific Ocean Whale and Ecosystem Research (POWER) survey between July and September.

Platform of Opportunity (POP) sightings

There was no additional report of gray whales sighted by POP platforms during the commercial whaling and dolphin fisheries operations in May 2020 to April 2021. Also no sightings from other POP platforms were reported.

MORTALITY

Stranding (including beached animals)

No stranding of gray whale was reported during the period concerned. However, old skeletonized remains of a gray whale were found by local citizens at the beach of Notoro lake, Abashiri, Hokkaido prefecture on 20 July, 2020. From the morphological characterization of the skull and mandible, this animal was identified as gray whale. The skull was almost completely skeletonized and the part of the skull, right mandible, five vertebrae, one epiphysial plate and one finger bone have been collected and stored at Abashiri Kyodoshiryokan (Abashiri folk museum). This material is under study.

Entanglement

No entanglement of gray whale was reported during the period concerned.

Administrative action

Given the increase in the number of sightings of gray whales in Japan's coastal waters, on 27 April 2016, the Fisheries Agency of Japan (FAJ) issued a notification to all coastal prefectural governments. The purpose of the notification was to draw their attention to the increasing sightings of gray whales, and to remind relevant coastal communities (including local fishermen) through prefectural governments on the relevant regulations concerning the conservation of gray whales (release of live whales incidentally taken as well as the prohibition of possession and sale of their whale products). No sighting of gray whale was reported from the prefectures during the report period.

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Table 1. Reported gray whales around Japan since 1955 to present (April 2020).

Date dd/mm/yyyy	Geographical locality	Ocean basin	Biological data	n	Source	
					Status	Reference
16/03/1955	Toyama (Toyama Bay) 36°41'N – 137°12'E	Sea of Japan	?	1	Entanglement	Nambu <i>et al.</i> (2003)
10/06/1959	Off Kii-Ohshima, Kushimoto, Wakayama 33°29'N – 135°55'E	Pacific	?	1	Sighting	Nishiwaki and Kasuya (1970)
02/02/1968	Off estuary of Kumano River, Shingu, Wakayama 36.02E33°43'N – 136°02'E	Pacific	Juvenile 9.0 m female	1	Unknown*1	Nishiwaki and Kasuya (1970)
??/04/1970	Toyama (Toyama Bay) 36.41N-137.12E	Sea of Japan	?	1	Entanglement	Nambu <i>et al.</i> (2003)
27/03/1982	Off Toba (Ise Bay), Mie 34°28'N – 136°53'E	Pacific	Juvenile*2	1	Sighting	Furuta (1984)
25/04/1985	Off Taiji, Wakayama 33°34'N – 136°01'E	Pacific	Juvenile	1	Sighting (through TV)	Kasamatsu and Ishikawa (1990)
25/01/1990	Kohzu, Kanagawa 35°16'N – 139°13'E	Pacific	Juvenile 8.0 m male	1	Beached	Kasamatsu and Ishikawa (1990)
Middle/04/ 1993	Off Izu-Ohshima, Tokyo 34°30'N – 139°30'E	Pacific	Juvenile	2*3	Sighting	Mochizuki, Mori and Ishikawa (p.c.)
07/04/1995	Toyokoro, Obihiro, Hokkaido 42°35'N – 143°32'E	Pacific	Juvenile 9.5 m female	1	Beached	Sawamura and Kimura (p.c.)
16/05/1996	Suttu, Hokkaido 42°45'N – 140°10'E	Sea of Japan	Adult	1	Entanglement	Fisheries Agency
02/03/1997	Matunami, Kashiwazaki, Niigata 37°24'N – 138°34'E	Sea of Japan	?	1	Beached (skull only)	ICR (2005)
22/07/1997	Off Kumanoura, Saga, Kumamoto 33°06'N – 133°09'E	Pacific	Juvenile	2	Sighting	Kato and Tokuhiko (1997)
19/03/2002	Miyazaki beach, Miyazaki 31°35'N – 131°27'E	Pacific	Juvenile Est. 7.7 m	1	Beached	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2003)
06/05/2003	Off Shizuoka (Suruga Bay), Shizuoka 35°00'N – 138°46'E	Pacific	Juvenile, 9-10 m	2	Sighting	Shizuoka TV Asahi
11/05/2005	Tomiyama (Tokyo Bay), Chiba 35°04'N – 139°49'E	Pacific	Juvenile, 7.81 m	1	Entanglement	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2005)
15/07/2005	Enoshima, Onagawa Miyagi 38°23'N – 141°37'E	Pacific	Cow (12.79 m) Calf (7.75 m)	2	Entanglement	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2006)
18/01/2007	Sanriku, Ofunato, Iwate 39°09'N – 141°54'E	Pacific	Female 9.19 m	1	Entanglement	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2007)
01/08/2007	Nishikioka, Tomakomai, Hokkaido 42°36'N – 141°30'E	Pacific	Female 12.33 m	1	Beached	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2008)
04/11/2009	Off Owase, Mie 33°52'N – 136°10'E	Pacific	Juvenile, Ca. 6 – 7 m	1	Sighting	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2010)
12/03/2012	Off Irako, Tawara, Aich 34°36'N – 137°01'E	Pacific	Juvenile	1	Sighting	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2012), Ohike <i>et al.</i> (in prep)
06/04/2014	Off Teradomari, Niigata 37°38'N – 138°48'E	Sea of Japan	Adult, juvenile *4	2	Sighting	The Asahi Newspaper and by direct sighting by S. Nishiwaki
17/03/2015	Off Kozushima Island 34°13'N – 139°09'E	Pacific	Sub-adult	1	Sighting	https://www.facebook.com/aquamatedivingclub

31/03/2015	Off Teradomari, Niigata 37°38'N – 138°48'E	Sea of Japan	Adult	1	Sighting	The Asahi Newspaper
19/04/2015	Off Miho, Shizuoka 35°00'N – 138°31'E	Pacific	Sub-adult	1	Re-sighting of Kozushima ind. In May 2015	Direct sighting by H. Ohizumi
12/01/2016	Off Nishi-Kawana, Tateyama, Chiba, 34°57.416'N-139°45.103'E	Pacific	Unknown	1*5	Re-sighting of Kozushima ind. In May 2015	http://nop.chips.jp/frame/003.html
04/03/2016	Wadoura, Minamiboso, Chiba, 35°2.085'N-140°1.05'E	Pacific	Juvenile, 8.9 m female	1	Beached	Direct survey by G. Nakamura
05/04/2016	Arai beach, Ito, Shizuoka, 34°58.06'N - 139°07.40'E	Pacific	ca. 7 m	1	Beached	http://izu-np.co.jp/ito/news/20160406iz000000018000c.html
22/02/2017	Off Yokosuka, Kanagawa, 35°19.55'N -139°40.27'E	Pacific	Unknown	1	Sighting	https://www.facebook.com/masamichi.saita/?pnref=story
18-23/04/2017	Off Futtsu, Chiba, 35°19.37'N-139°45.87'E	Pacific	Unknown	1	Sighting	http://news.tbs.co.jp/newseye/tbs_newseye3031425.html
02/05/2017	Aogashima Island, Tokyo, 32°27.26'N-139°46.535'E	Pacific	Unknown	1	Sighting	https://eternal0love.wordpress.com/2017/05/02/ (Not available after January 2018)
10/02/2018	Aogashima, Tokyo, 32°28.2'N-139°45.4'E	Pacific	Juvenile	1	Sighting	Personal communication
08/03/2019	off Kaga, Ishikawa, 36°22.04'N-136°20.49'E	Sea of Japan	Unknown	1	Sighting	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkJMnw1znZPM
15/03/2019	off Arawa, Fukui, 36°16.04'N-136°11.42'E	Sea of Japan	Unknown	1*6	Sighting	https://www.chunichi.co.jp/article/fukui/20190316/CK2019031602000021.html
11/04/2019	Manazuru, Kanagawa, 35°8.55'N-139°9.61'E	Pacific	Juvenile, 8.77 m male	1	Beached	Direct survey by Taru, Suzuki and Nakamura.
22/04/2019	Miyake Island, Tokyo, 34°4.122'N-139°28.48'E	Pacific	Juvenile, ca. 9 m	1	Sighting	https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20190423/k10011893291000.html https://youtu.be/DlmsNKSCB_8 https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/videonews/mnn?a=20190514-00000335-nnn-soci
13/05-02/06/2019	off Kahoku, Ishikawa, 36°45.2'N-136°41.8'E	Sea of Japan	Unknown	1*6	Sighting	https://www.oricon.co.jp/article/810434/
20/07/2020*7	Beach of Noto lake, Abashiri, Hokkaido, 44°6.295'N-144°9.389'E	Sea of Okhotsk	Unknown	1	Beached	Fisheries Agency

*1: Nishiwaki and Kasuya (1970) reported as “Dead might be caused by the wound made by someone during the evening of the day”.

*2: Furuta (1984) estimated animal length to be 12m, but photographs of the animal clearly indicate much smaller length indicating juvenile.

*3: There was an alternative that one additional animal was seen in adjacent waters.

*4: There are some possibilities those were cow and calf pair, but they did not occur as one unit at the same time.

*5: From May 2015 to April 2016, two more sightings have been recorded. One of which was sighted at Akasawa, Ito City, Shizuoka prefecture (34°51.101'N-139°5.771'E) on January 12, 2016 and the another one was sighted at Miike port of Miyake Island, Tokyo. According to Nakamura *et al.* (2017), these animals were re-sighting of Kozushima individual in 2015.

*6: Re-sighting of Kaga animal in 2019.

*7: The date of skeletonized remain was found.

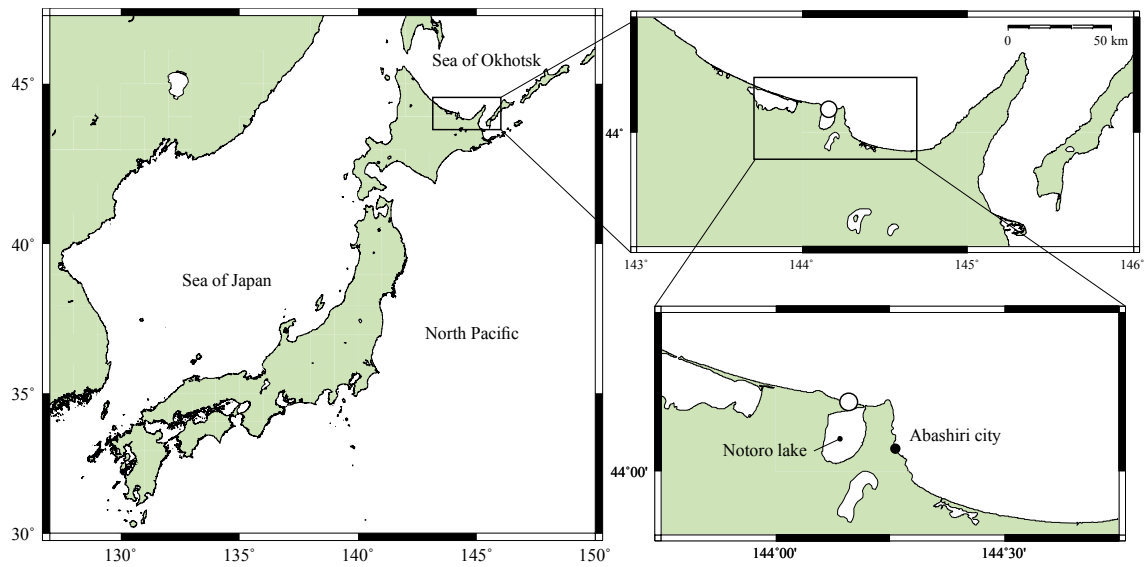


Fig. 1 Open circles show the location where old skeletonized remains of the gray whales were found on 20 July, 2020.