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Status Report of Conservation and
Researches on the Western North Pacific
Gray Whales in Japan, May 2016 - April
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Status Report of Conservation and Researches on the Western North Pacific Gray Whales in Japan, May 2016 - April 2017

Gen Nakamura¹⁾, Hideyoshi Yoshida²⁾, Hiroyuki Morita³⁾, Kohei Ito³⁾, Takeharu Bando⁴⁾, Toshihiro Mogoe⁴⁾, Tomio Miyashita²⁾ and Hidehiro Kato¹⁾,

1) Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology, 4-5-7 Konan, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-8477, Japan; e-mail contact, gnakam1@kaiyodai.ac.jp

2) National Research Institute of Far Seas Fisheries, Japan Fisheries Research and Education Agency, Fukuura 2-12-4, Kanazawa-ku, Yokohama, Kanagawa, 236-8648, Japan

3) Fisheries Agency, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 1-2-1 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-8907, Japan

4) Institute of Cetacean Research, 4-5 Toyomi-cho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo 104-0055, Japan

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Abstract

Following the IWC Resolution 2001-3, 2004-1 and 2005-3, this paper presents most recent status of conservation and research on the western gray whale conducted by Japanese delegation. No anthropogenic mortality due to entanglement has been reported from the adjacent waters off Japan during the period from May 2016 to April 2017, while two opportunistic sighting of gray whale were made in the Tokyo bay in the 22 February and 18 to 23 April. Fisheries Agency promptly informed the occurrence and gave cautions to local responsible authorities to avoid entanglements of this animal from fisheries nets and /or ship strikes.

Introduction

As in 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 supporting further efforts to conserve this population, IWC has largely urged the conservation of western gray whales. Under such circumstances, as response to those IWC Resolutions, Japan provided scientific information on the western gray whales in June 2005 to May 2006 by Kato *et al.* (2006), in June 2006 to May 2007 by Kato *et al.* (2007), from June 2007 to April 2008 by Kato *et al.* (2008) from May 2008 to April 2009 by Kato *et al.* (2009), from May 2009 to April 2010 by Kato *et al.* (2010), from May 2010 to April 2011 by Kato *et al.* (2011), from May 2011 to April 2012 by Kato *et al.* (2012), from May 2012 to April 2013 by Kato *et al.* (2013), from May 2013 to April 2014 by Kato *et al.* (2014), from May 2014 to April 2015 by Kato *et al.* (2015) and from May 2015 to April 2016 by Kato *et al.* (2016). We hereby submit a similar report for this year's meeting on the information for the period from May 2016 to April 2017.

All known occurrences of the western gray whale around Japanese coasts since 1955 to current are given in Table 1.

Sightings

Systematic Sightings

National Research Institute of Far Seas Fisheries conducted dedicate systematic cetacean sighting surveys using research vessel off the southern coast of Japan in April 2016 and using aircraft off the northern coast of Japan in May and August 2016 with a total of 639 n. miles and 3,030 n. miles effective searching distances, respectively, there was no gray whale sighting throughout the cruises. Bando *et al.* (2017) reported no gray whale sighting during the systematic cetacean sighting survey (2,662 n. miles by whale sampling/sighting vessels and 3,185 n. miles by dedicated sighting vessels) made under the 2016 JARPN II – offshore component in 16 May to 6 September 2016 in northwestern North Pacific. In addition, Yasunaga *et al.* (2017) and Yoshida *et al.* (2017) reported no gray whale during cetacean sightings under 2016 JARPN II – coastal components at Sanriku (Miyagi) and Kushiro (Hokkaido) in April to October 2016.

POP sightings during small-type whaling and dolphin fishery operations

There was no additional report of gray whale sightings by POP bases from all of small-type whaling and dolphin fisheries operations in May 2016 to April 2017.

Other POP sightings

Two gray whale sightings were reported from waters around the Japanese coast, especially from the Tokyo bay in May 2016 to April 2017. The sightings were reported from off Yokosuka city, Kanagawa prefecture and off Futtsu city, Chiba prefecture (Fig. 1). The sighting of off Yokosuka was reported through the post for the SNS of local fisherman of Yokohama-city in the 22 February. According to the local fisherman, this animal was observed from several local fishing vessels in the same day. The pictures of the tail flukes and dorsal surface were posted. From its grayish dorsal surface with white spots and orange structure, which seems to be barnacles and sea rice, we identified this animal as gray whale. However, the pictures were not clear enough to identify individuals. Second sighting was reported through the web news in the 18 April. A fisherman filmed this animal about 4 km away from the Futtsu port. According to the fisherman, this animal was solitary animal and swimming around the fishing vessel for about 3 hours while he was fishing. The resolution of the film also not clear for the use of photo identification. This animal has been staying off Futtsu and sighted several times as of 23 April. At present, it is not clear whether these animals are the same individual or not.

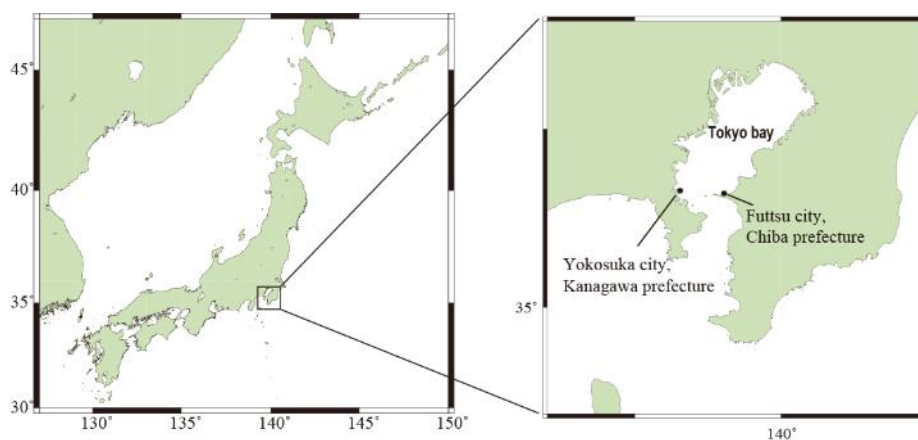


Fig. 1 Geographical location of the sightings of the gray whales around Japanese coasts during the period in May 2016 to April 2017.

Mortality

Stranding (including beached animals)

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

Entanglement

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

Research Activities

Nakamura *et al.*, (in press.) compared the photographs of the gray whales taken from Izu archipelago, off Shizuoka and Chiba prefectures from 2015 to 2016. They clarified that all sighted animals in 2016 were the same individual, which was previously sighted in Weller *et al.* (2015). This animal was firstly marked as a calf off Sakhalin during August 2014. In addition, they occurred at Kozushima, Nijima and Miho in 2015. Nakamura *et al.* (in press.) also concluded that the stranded animal at Wadoura should be a different individual from the animal found at around Kozushima Island in 2015.

Administrative action

When the sights of gray whales were reported, the Fisheries Agency of Japan (FAJ) immediately asked relevant prefectures to take necessary actions. On both of the two POP sightings in February and April, upon a request from the FAJ, the Tokyo Metropolitan government and the prefectural governments of Kanagawa, Chiba and Shizuoka instructed local communities to avoid entanglement of the gray whale and reminded them of relevant regulations related to the conservation of gray whales.

Given the increasing number of sighting reports of gray whales in Japanese coastal waters, on 27 April 2016, the FAJ issued a new notification to all coastal prefectural governments to draw their attention to the increasing sightings of gray whales, and to re-request them to remind relevant coastal communities including local fishermen of the relevant regulations concerning the conservation of gray whales. Furthermore, the FAJ made this notification publicly available on its website in order to enhance further public awareness on the conservation of gray whales.

Other

Kato (TUMSAT) was nominated as the coordinator of the Memorandum of Co-operation for conservation of Western Gray whale at the 2016 IWC Commission meeting. It is expected this event will contribute enhancement of Western Gray whales.

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Table 1. All known and reported gray whale occurrences around Japan since 1955 to present (till April 2017).

Date dd/mm/yy	From which waters	Region	Sexual status and other	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 9.0m female	1	Unknown*	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**	1	Sighting	Furuta (1984)
25/04/1985	Off Taiji, Wakayam 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 8.0m male	1	Beached	Kasamatsu and Ishikawa (1990)
Middle/04/ 1993	Off Izu-Ohshima, Tokyo 34°30'N - 139°30'E	Pacific	Juvenile	2***	Sighting	Mochizuki, Mori and Ishikawa (p.c.)
07/04/1995	Toyokoro, Obihiro, Hokkaido 42°35'N - 143°32'E	Pacific	Juvenile 9.5m 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 Tokuhiro (1997)
19/03/2002	Miyazaki beach, Miyazaki 31°35'N - 131°27'E	Pacific	Juvenile Est. 7.7m	1	Beached	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2003)
06/05/2003	Off Shizuoka (Suruga Bay), Shizuoka 35°00'N - 138°46'E	Pacific	Juvenile, 9-10m	2	Sighting	Shizuoka TV Asahi
11/05/2005	Tomiyama (Tokyo Bay), Chiba 35°04'N - 139°49'E	Pacific	Juvenile, 7.81m	1	Entanglement	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2005)
15/07/2005	Enoshima, Onagawa Miyagi 38°23'N - 141°37'E	Pacific	Cow (12.79m) Calf (7.75m)	2	Entanglement	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2006)
18/01/2007	Sanriku, Ofunato, Iwate 39°09'N - 141°54'E	Pacific	Female 9.19m	1	Entanglement	Kato <i>et al.</i> (2007)
01/08/2007	Nishikioka, Tomakomai, Hokkaido 42°36'N - 141°30'E	Pacific	Female 12.33m	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 ****	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	Re-sighting of Kozushima ind. in May 2015	http://nop.chips.jp/frame/003.html
04/03/2016	Wadaura, Minamiboso, Chiba, 35°2.085'N-140°1.05'E	Pacific	Female, 8.9 m	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

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

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

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

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

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.* (in press.), these animals were re-sighting of Kozushima individual in 2015.

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