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Possible occurrence of a Gray Whale off Korea in 2015

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Gray whales were once common off coast of the Korean peninsula (Andrews, 1914; Tago, 1922; Mizue, 1951). The last reported commercial catches were off Ulsan, South Korea, in 1966 (Brownell and Chun, 1977) and the last sighting record of a gray whale off Korea was 2 individuals that were migrating south on 3 January 1977, 5 miles off of Bang-eo jin, Ulsan city (Park, 1995). Gray whales also have not been reported as bycaught or stranded since 1996 when a national reporting system was initiated and more recently, between 2003 and 2011, annual surveys for gray whales were conducted in Korean waters (Kim et al., 2013). While these surveys were specifically designed to occur when and where gray whales were observed in the past, no whales were sighted.

On 28 February 2015, a video clip was taken of what appears to be a gray whale. This video was uploaded on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ4J7luGgcE>) by Yung-Jin Oh. He titled it “I saw the whale in Shamecheok”, Korea. We were not made aware of the video clip until October 2017. In the video clip, an apparent gray whale is shown and the audio track contains people describing the size (>15 m) and appearance. This dialogue was translated into English in Appendix 1.

We attempted to find the exact place where the video was taken. The uploader mentioned he saw the whale in Samcheok and part of nearby marine structures like a yellow light house and seawall were seen in the image. We were able to find the location through the unique form of the structure (Fig. 1). The whale in the video was swimming near the port facility of the Samcheok Thermal Power Plant located in Wondeok-eup, Samcheok-si, Gangwon-do, Korea managed by the Korea Southern Power Co. Ltd (Fig. 2, 3). The facility manager of the power plant has confirmed the location shown in the image. He estimated that it would have been taken in early 2015, judging by the progress of construction of the seawall in the video.

To assess species identification, we collected opinions of biologists (including gray whale experts), naturalists, and guides of whale watching companies, and all of them agreed that the quality of the video and the distance to the animal precludes clear identification of the species. That being said, we suggest that the mostly likely candidate species is a gray whale based on characteristics including blow shape, diving pattern, and the apparent white markings and body coloration. We are presently trying to find Yung-Jin Oh who uploaded the video to get additional information. As part of this effort, banners have been posted in several areas near where the whale was seen and we have contacted people with the same name.

Gray whales were once common off Korea and the species is culturally important to the people of South Korea (Tatar, 2017). If the observation reported here is indeed of a gray whale, it represents the first sighting in Korean waters in over 40 years.

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Figure 1. The captured images of the YouTube video clip. ©Yung-Jin Oh



Figure 2. Port facility of the Samcheok Thermal Power Plant (37°17'N, 129°37'E , 13th, Mar, 2018).

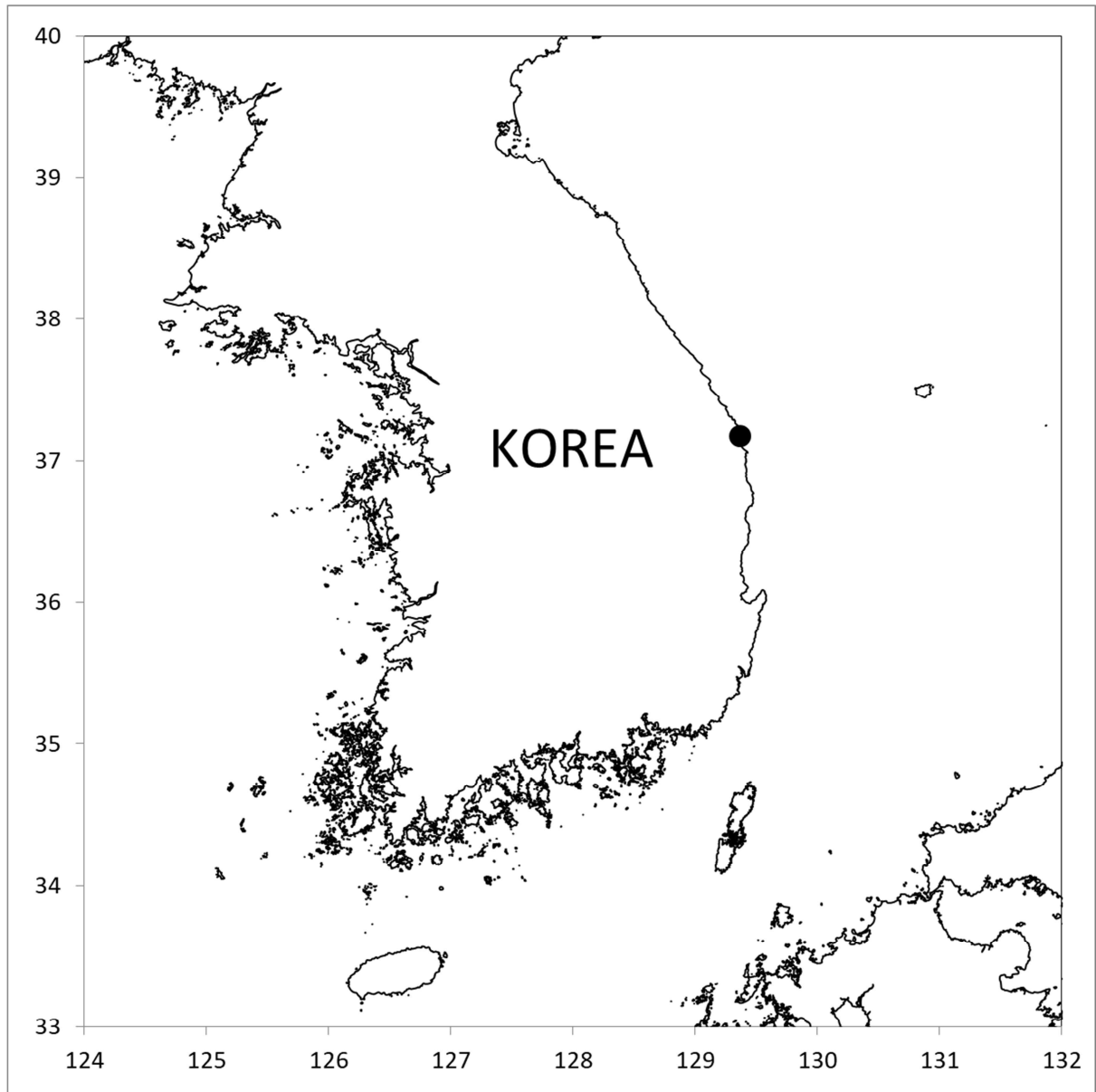


Figure 3. Location of the whale video clip taken in 2015.

Appendix 1. Dialog in the video, I saw a whale on the sea, Samcheok (translated in English).

0:02 He looks whitish with barnacles... Such an old and huge one.

0:05 This one is huge.

0:07 He lives long.

0:07 Look at that.

0:08 Over there, Over there. Wow.

0:12 What is this?

0:18 He's moving over there.

0:24 Let me know when his coming up. I'm ready to take a picture.

0:29 Coming up. Coming up. Oh! Really large.

0:32 I took pictures.

0:35 No. No. The color is the same with last one. Dorsal color of the animal was the same.

0:40 Is there another one?

0:41 No. That's him.

0:42 It seems the same animal.

0:44 See the size. How big. He turns over there. Coming up.

0:52 I took pictures.

0:55 We should take this.

0:56 Ha Ha.

0:57 Really huge.

0:58 Worth 1 billion Won (100,000 USD), 1 billion! Should prepare hand harpoon.

1:01 Moving again. The size is not a joke.

1:05 Looks more than 15 m.

1:09 He moves over there.

1:10 He look white.

1:12 Disappeared.

1:15 He will show up again after 10 minutes, once he goes into the water.