

PRESS RELEASE - ISSUED BY MARINElife

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Ocean giants invade south west Britain

The Fin Whale is the second largest living animal on the planet, growing up to 88 feet long and weighing up to 120 tonnes. It is on the IUCN Red List of globally endangered species.

One of the largest ever known gatherings of Fin Whales in British waters has recently been observed in the Celtic Deep, 50-70 nautical miles off the coasts of north Cornwall and south west Pembrokeshire.

On the afternoon of the 21st May, some 21 Fin Whales were observed in the Celtic Deep, with the gathering of whales extending over at least ten miles of ocean.

The whales were spotted by scientists Becky Scott, Cheryl Yarnham and Steve Hughes from the marine conservation charity MARINElife.

Team leader for MARINElife Becky Scott explained: "We saw five groups of Fin Whales in little over half an hour, in group sizes of up to seven. The whales were blowing frequently and some were lunge-feeding near the surface, it was absolutely fantastic. Luckily, many of the other scientists onboard were able to share this amazing spectacle with us."

Dr Tom Brereton, MARINElife Research Director commented: "We have been monitoring Fin Whale numbers in their Bay of Biscay stronghold for over 15 years, so we are used to seeing large numbers, but to see so many within British waters in close proximity is unprecedented and an exciting new discovery."

The team of MARINElife researchers are currently on a three-week research cruise (18th May -9th June) conducting whale, dolphin and seabird surveys on board the Cefas (Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science) research vessel, the R.V. *Cefas Endeavour*. The chief aim of the Cefas survey is to assess the status of schooling fish such as anchovy and sardine in the Celtic Sea and English/Bristol Channel, by fishing trawls and echosounders.

Having a team of fishery experts on the ship has proved helpful in our understanding of why the whales may be present. Dr Jeroen van der Kooij from Cefas commented: "acoustic echosounders detected dense layers of krill as well as sandeel schools in the area, both of which are known to be key food sources for these animals."

Due to a lack of surveys in the past, it is unclear if Fin Whales have always been present in the Celtic Deep in the spring, but they are certainly rare during the summer months when most surveys take place. However, recent survey work by the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, the Sea Trust and Sea Watch Foundation indicate that Fin Whales and other large whales are being increasingly encountered in the Irish and Celtic Seas. A northward shift in distribution of these animals and their prey due to climate warming is a likely explanation.

Dr Colin MacLeod, MARINElife's Chief Scientific Adviser and an expert on whales and climate change explained: "This is one of many changes in whales, dolphins and porpoises which scientists are discovering and which are thought to be driven by climate change. As well as the movement of Fin Whale into UK shelf waters to feed, these include declines in the distribution of White-beaked Dolphin in the west of Scotland, the movement of Common Dolphins into the North Sea and, most surprisingly, the appearance of a Pacific Grey Whale

in the Mediterranean last summer. These changes indicate the extent to which climate change is affecting our marine animals, and if it is affecting these top predators to such an extent, it is likely that it is also affecting other marine life further down the food chain, including species which are commercially important for the fishing industry.”

The MARINELife surveys form part of a wider study of marine animals off south west England as part of the Charm III project, which involves 17 French and UK research institutes studying and mapping biodiversity and human activities in the Channel.

MARINELife data is important in helping to identify marine protected areas for wildlife around our shores and in ongoing research to assess climate change impacts and other threats to whales and dolphins.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

MARINELife is a UK-based charity established in 2005 to coordinate and develop a growing portfolio of cetacean and seabird research and monitoring projects, chiefly in European waters. Focal areas of work include whale, dolphin and seabird monitoring from ferries and other ‘ships of opportunity’, and research on Balearic Shearwaters, Bottlenose Dolphins and White-beaked Dolphins. Through these projects and collaborations, we aim to further the conservation of the wildlife of oceans and coasts through scientific investigation and educational activities.

Further information on MARINELife can be found by visiting our website at www.marine-life.org.uk

Cefas, an executive agency of Defra, is the UK’s largest and most diverse applied marine science centre. It provides evidence-based scientific advice, manages related data and information, conducts world-class scientific research, and facilitates collaborative action through wide-ranging relationships that span the EU, UK government, non-governmental organisations, research centres and industry.

Further information about Cefas can be found at <http://www.cefas.defra.gov.uk/>

Further information on the Charm III project can be found at <http://wwz.ifremer.fr/charm/About-Charm>

To follow daily sightings reports of whales and dolphins from the Cefas surveys go to the CHARM III blog

<http://marinelife-charm3.blogspot.com/>