

The Caribbean Sea is a special habitat for the feeding, reproduction and migration of marine mammals. 21 species have been counted in the French Caribbean region: baleen whales, including humpback whales and fin whales, and toothed whales including sperm whales and numerous species of dolphins.

FRANCE TAKES A STAND IN THE SAFEGUARDING OF CETACEANS

The July 27th, 1995 decree, integrally protects all marine mammals found in all French Caribbean territorial waters.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the international context:

Created by the Washington Convention (1946) for the regulation of whaling, IWC became an international organization which, to date, 80 member States, some of which promote whaling while others, specially France, stand for the protection of the whales. The Commission adopted in 1982 a Moratorium on Commercial Whaling. However, small traditional whaling communities have got a hunting permit for aboriginal subsistence whaling while other countries are yet hunting marine mammals for commercial purposes or «scientific» whaling. These latter countries fight for the revival of whaling.

Facing these pro-whaling countries, France, in cooperation with other countries from European Union, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, France firmly positions herself for the protection of marine mammals and supports this decision by setting up a sanctuary.

There are already two sanctuaries where commercial whaling will be prohibited in case of dissolution of the moratorium: one located in the Indian Ocean set up in 1979 and one in Antarctica (1994), at France's initiative.

The aim of this sanctuary approach of the Exclusive Economic Zone in the French Caribbean is first to affirm the position of France in favour of the conservation of marine mammal populations, by the creation of a sanctuary in the French Caribbean in a zone crucial to their reproduction as well as for keeping up the Moratorium on Commercial Whaling.

TARGETED GOALS

France aims:

- To act in reestablishing marine mammal populations of the Caribbean and to extend this protection to these species and the protection of their habitats. It is already prohibited to hunt marine mammals in the Exclusive Economic Zone of the French West Indies, which will become a sanctuary.
- To make the French Caribbean region a model for the harmonious life for marine mammals and their consideration in the development of human activities. The EEZ will then be the subject of dialogue among all the stakeholders in order to assure the conservation of this privileged habitat for the reproduction of marine mammals.
- To affirm her position in favour of the conservation of marine mammals and to foster neighbouring Caribbean States to join the initiative or to carry out similar projects.

THE PROJECT GENESIS

In September 2003, ministerial exchanges allowed the officialization of this sanctuary for marine mammals project in the Exclusive Economic Zone of the French Caribbean. Initiated by ECCEA (Eastern Caribbean Coalition for Environmental Awareness), it is driven by DIREN Martinique, in partnership with DIREN Guadeloupe since 2006.

In 2006, DIREN Martinique implemented a cross sectoral Steering Committee which met for the first time on June 2nd, 2006, under the presidency of the General Secretary of the Prefecture of Guadeloupe and it validated:

- The list of members of the Steering Committee
- The conduct of the project by DIREN Martinique
- The adoption of the Exclusive Economy Zone as a privileged zone to develop the project
- The development of the project exclusively in the Exclusive Economy Zone of the French Caribbean, as a first step.

Three thematic workshops were created: the regulation workshop, the scientific workshop and the communication workshop.

- The regulation workshop, conducted by DIREN Guadeloupe aims to provide a study to determine the most appropriate statutory tools to build the project. It will then offer the Steering Committee the necessary regulations that limit potentially dangerous activities to the presence of marine mammals in the French Caribbean.
- The communication workshop, conducted by DIREN Martinique worked on the choice of the name and on this information booklet. This workshop will then work on proposals of better targeted awareness actions.
- The scientific workshop coordinates the different observation protocols:

Aerial patrol in 2007, financed by the French Marine Protected Areas Agency and carried out by the Research Center on Marine Mammals, La Rochelle, and Sea patrols, financed by DIREN and carried out by SEPANMAR (Martinique), Breach and Association Evasion tropicale (Guadeloupe). During the last scientific workshop, a common protocol had been developed for the marine patrol on the basis of counting already made in the West Indies and inspired by the ongoing observation methods of the Pelagos sanctuary in the Mediterranean.

MARINE MAMMALS OF THE FRENCH CARIBBEAN

The Common Bottlenose Dolphin

Tursiops truncatus



Dark gray on its dorsal area with a lighter colour on its belly, this 2 m - 4 m long cetacean weighs between 200 kg - 500 kg and is characterized by an asymmetrical jaw which gives it an everlasting smile. It is a curious animal which can accompany divers and boats. Groups are usually composed of 20-30 individuals. They dive in order to hunt fish and squid. This species is very sensitive to human activities and to the degradation of coastal and marine areas because of its coastal habits. The species can be targeted and captured in the Caribbean to be placed in dolphinariums and other tourist attraction dolphin tanks. The death rate while in captivity is between 7-12 years, however the natural lifespan is over 50 years.

The Humpback Whale

Megaptera novaeangliae



The Humpback whale, because of its physical characteristics and its proclivity to jump is easily identifiable. It can be recognized by its white marbled tail fluke which it raises when it dives and by its long ventral fins. This baleen whale grows up to 15m and weighs up to 40 tons. It has no teeth but a baleen plate to filter water and catch its food. As a migratory species, it is found in the Caribbean from December to May. The Humpback's melodious call, emitted only by males, is characteristic of the species as well as its powerful blow done during surface apparitions. In the past, sailors believed that its entrancing call was the siren's song. The near coastal habits of the humpback make it very sensitive to human pressure.

Fraser's Dolphin

Lagenodelphis hosei



Discovered very recently (in the 70's), this species of over 2m and 150 kg is met in the French West Indies. Characterized by its short beak, the Fraser's dolphin travels in large groups which can include different species of dolphin and it feeds essentially on surface and mid-water fish.

Pantropical Spotted Dolphin

Stenella attenuata



With a size exceeding 2m and a weight of about 100kg, this dolphin has spotted skin at adult age and is regularly observed in the French Caribbean. With social groups ranging from 10 to several hundred individuals, this gregarious dolphin feeds on squid and surface fish, essentially flying fish. The species does not seem to be threatened but the development of repeated human observation activities on the same groups can disturb their behavior in the French Caribbean region which serves as a reproduction zone where you can meet young ones. (This dolphin can be easily confused with the spotted Atlantic dolphin which has more pronounced spots)

The Sperm Whale

Physeter macrocephalus



With its large square head and crumpled skin, the Sperm Whale looks like an enormous tree trunk on the surface. For its feeding, essentially composed of mollusks of all sizes, from deep and mid waters, it arches its back, shows its tail and dives into the abyss of up to 3000 meters! The Sperm Whale typically blows with a oblique spout at a 45 degree angle on the left. If they are observed, most often alternating between rest and feeding phases, the group meets regularly in order to socialize, which goes on sometimes for several hours. But Sperm Whales are generally encountered in groups of less than 10 individuals. Most Sperm Whales moving about in the Caribbean are attached to certain zones (up to 11 years in the same habitat) for crucial activities such as reproduction, suckling, feeding and this makes the species very vulnerable. A male Sperm Whale grows to 20 meters and weighs almost 50 tons.

The Short Finned Pilot Whale

Globicephala macrorhynchus



The short finned pilot whale has long pectoral fins and a bulbous forehead which gives it the local nickname "marsouin calebasse" (gourd porpoise). It lives in groups of about 10 individuals. This species grows to 6-8 m and weighs 1-4 tons. Pilot whales are large predators that feed essentially on squid and pelagic fish.