

Historical strandings of cetaceans on the Portuguese coast: anecdotes, people and naturalists

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*Large whale strandings have always been intriguing to people through the centuries. The size and strangeness of these events always attracted popular attention and were, later on, a source for food, oil and other products. Our goal was to document species occurrence over time along the mainland coast of Portugal through the use of historical records as they can provide useful information on cetaceans' species. A total of 38 historical records from the 16th to the 20th Centuries were collected from several Portuguese institutes and personal archives. Results show an increasing awareness of the scientific importance of strandings reflected throughout the years in number and in the detail of the strandings. The most common stranded species recorded was *Physeter macrocephalus* followed by *Balaenoptera physalus*. Even though historical stranding records are sparse for mainland Portugal, the information gathered indicates a high diversity of cetaceans. We also addressed the evolution of the historical records in aspects such as in number of records, description detail, pictures' content and scientific accuracy. We were able to establish relationships linking strandings, local fishing communities, the general public, and particularly the contribution of early 20th Century zoologists. Results indicate that reports made by local fishing communities and the role of naturalists and science journals of the 19th and early 20th Centuries was of considerable relevance to the present knowledge about cetaceans, giving an important contribution to modern day cetacean studies.*

Keywords: history of science, large whales, natural history, strandings, occurrence, Portugal

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INTRODUCTION

A stranding occurs when animals die or become weakened at sea and are brought passively to shore by wind and wave action (Perrin & Geraci, 2009) where they are often found by people. Marine mammals, both cetaceans and seals, are commonly stranded onto beaches and other coastal areas. Throughout history stranded whales have fascinated people and questions about the reasons why they strand have always arisen (Perrin & Geraci, 2009). Since ancient history, coastal human populations have been familiar with the presence of cetaceans, and probably their first approach to a cetacean was through strandings. Myths and legends have arisen as a result of strandings' events (Constantine, 2009) but scientific information only started to be collected from early modern times.

A traditional source of information for the study of cetacean distribution has been the compilation of strandings' lists, especially in regions where historical records have been collected on a regular basis (Kinze, 1995). This is particularly true in the North Atlantic where stranding records have been documented continuously since the 16th Century (e.g. Kinze,

1995; Pierce *et al.*, 2007; Barthelmess & Svanberg, 2009), reflecting general public interest in large whales and other cetaceans ashore. Also, whereas the remains from a stranded whale did not leave traces in history, both the material and the spiritual culture it inspired have (Barthelmess, 2003).

In mainland Portugal, direct contact of local fishing communities with cetaceans have been known since the 12th Century through whaling and whale use (Brito, 2008, 2009) and this interest continues over the centuries with several zoologists dedicated to this subject in recent times. Nevertheless, compilations of observations and records are still sparse. Only at the beginning of the 1980s did dedicated studies and surveys occur (e.g. Teixeira, 1979; Sequeira, 1988) and systematic methodologies have been followed only since the 1990s for coastal populations of cetaceans. Also, characterization of cetacean communities along the Iberian shore is still poorly described in terms of species abundance and distribution and it is limited to a few sources (e.g. Brito *et al.*, 2009). Considering this, and given the lack of research in historical records for the Portuguese coast, we developed this retrospective research to historically characterize stranding events and to make available long term data for future research.

Our objective was to document cetacean species presence over time along the mainland coast of Portugal through the use of historical written records of strandings. We will also address the evolution of the historical records in different

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perspectives such as the description detail, image content and scientific accuracy. When possible we will establish relationships between strandings and local fishing communities and the general public, with a particular focus on the contribution of early zoologists. This study shows historical relationships between these stranded animals and people, and is relevant both to the history of science as well as giving an important contribution to modern day cetacean studies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Historical stranding records were obtained from several Portuguese national archives including the ‘Vasco da Gama’ Aquarium (Lisbon), the University of Coimbra, the Sea Museum (Cascais), the University of Lisbon, as well as from the national stranding database of the National Institute for Nature Conservation and Biodiversity and local newspapers.

In this study we focus only on stranding data from mainland Portugal. We only present data on specimens that stranded ashore dead or dying, but not those resulting from whaling activity or directed captures. Specimens collected for museums or of unknown geographical origin are also not presented even though these are also available in some sources.

The data analysed ranges from the 12th to the 20th Centuries. Our cutline during the 20th Century was the year 1977. From 1977 onwards the data began to be collected systematically with the implementation of a strandings’ national network which had a profound impact both in the number and the detail of the records. These records are available but

are not considered in the present work and have been the object of other studies such as Sequeira *et al.* (1992) and Sequeira *et al.* (1996).

RESULTS

Strandings along the centuries

We found 38 records of cetacean strandings from the year 1526 until 1977 with different types of information attached to each event (Appendix). Most commonly stranded species were sperm whales, *Physeter macrocephalus*, and fin whales, *Balaenoptera physalus*.

Most historical stranding information is available for the 20th Century (Figure 1), but before that nine events were recorded. Throughout this period of time, more detailed descriptions were made by the different researchers but geographical localization is always present (Figure 2).

16th to 19th Century strandings

In the 16th century there is only one record of a large whale (Soledade, 1705). The author describes in Areia Branca (Peniche) the stranding of a large whale with ‘30 cubits length and a corpulence similar to an 80 ton ship. The tail was 20 palms wide and in its mouth fit two men standing’.

In the 17th Century records of strandings are absent, and in the 18th and 19th Centuries only three strandings were recorded.

From these historical records most strandings were of large whales, both sperm and baleen whales (Appendix) and only one mass stranding was noticed. This mass stranding refers to ten sperm whales on the Algarve coast in 1784 (Figure 3A). The author (Sande, 1784) was present at the location and described through paintings the unusual mass stranding event. These paintings are ahead of their time because they include the detailed description of the place where the strandings occurred. The accuracy and detail of the location map is remarkable and unusual for the 18th Century and is indicative of the curiosity and natural interest of its author. The painting of the individual (Figure 3B) could be of one of the ten individuals that stranded ashore or it could be a compound representation of the species. The painting clearly shows the unique feature of the sperm whale, its lower jaw and other features such as the sex, the teeth, the flippers and flukes. Although it is not a very faithful representation of the species there was an attempt to document the size of the individual using a rudimentary scale. On the other hand there are a number of unclear characteristics such as the shape of the flipper and whether there is a second fin or if it represents an injury or even an exposed internal organ.

Another historical reference should be highlighted (one fin whale in Cacilhas in 1723) (Figure 4) as it was worthy of a newspaper article where it is stated (Anon, 1723): ‘The big fish that entered this harbour last week, is of an unknown species. Some say it is a *Bufalina*, which the French call *Souffleur*, meaning *blower*; others say it is a certain species of *balea*, that the Dutch call *Kapeku*; but its features are different from other known fish. It is described here in this newspaper, for the curious ones, a brief description of the fish and its measurements (...) This fish was



Fig. 1. Number of cetacean strandings: (A) by Century (N = 38); (B) by decade in the 20th Century (N = 29).

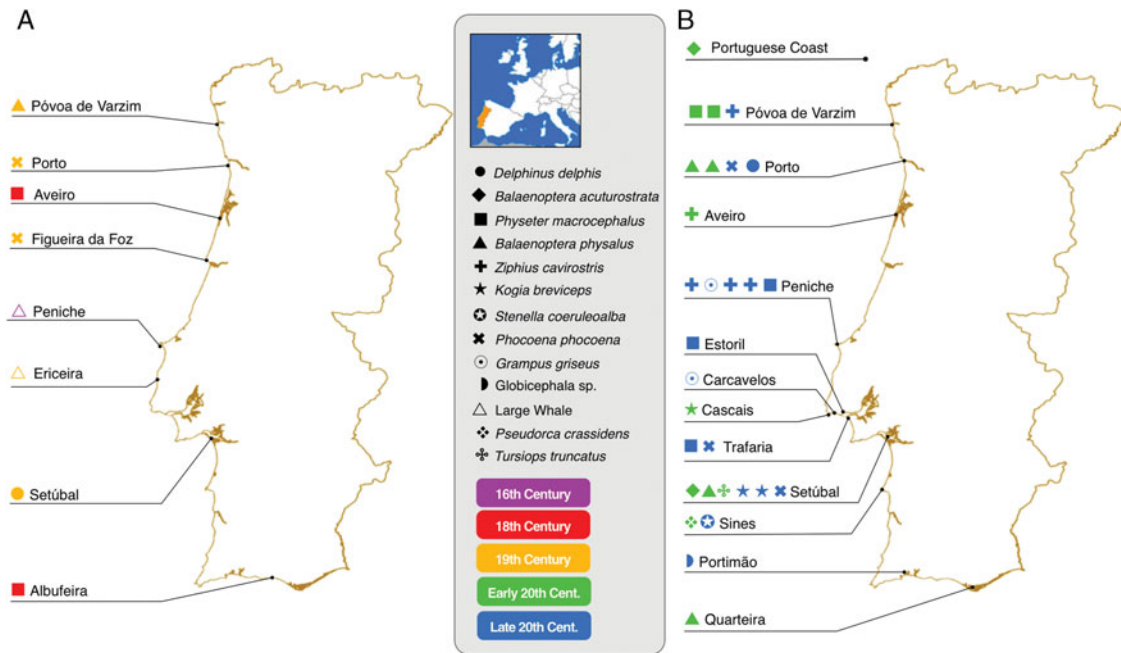


Fig. 2. Geographical location of strandings on the Portuguese coast, with reference to species and centuries: (A) from the 16th to the 19th Centuries; (B) from the early 20th Century to the late 20th Century.

eighty-seven palms of length and forty-three palms of thickness (...) in the thinnest part started the butt, horizontally instead of vertically like other fish, with four palms of length and seven of width. The butt finishes in two ends like a swallows with the extension of eighteen feet. The head was remarkably big’.

On 8 January 1782 another stranding event caused admiration and curiosity among the people of Aveiro. A judge issued a document stating that it was ‘a monstrous fish usually called spermaceti that was 20 palms wide’. From the whale a total of 46 barrels were obtained: six barrels of oil from the head and 40 barrels of oil from the body (Anon, 1945). Two centuries later, in 1945, a different author (Anon, 1945) analysed this event and concluded that it was indeed a cetacean and not a fish as it was initially described due to the insufficient coeval knowledge. The description was accompanied by a drawing (Figure 5) in which several characteristics were explained in detail and this allowed a reconstruction of the event and identification of the species. Although the image itself is not accurate the supplementary details are extremely helpful to understand the significance of the event.

On 18 February 1896, a large whale measuring approximately 22 m long was entangled in a fishermen’s net. The whale pulled the vessel frightening the crew who later described it as ‘a terrible enemy that was trying to swallow them whole’. This was witnessed by the locals gathered on shore. The national newspaper stated what the fishermen saw (Anon, 1896): ‘(...) a black figure similar to a ship hull, that expelled water like a fountain (...) some of the most courageous men in the village approached the monster, encountering a scene of horror. (...). The five men within the ship were exhausted and terrified and couldn’t separate the vessel from the whale. (...). Finally a local man with a gun and a lot of courage killed the monster’.

The cetacean was then brought to shore to be displayed for the locals.

20th Century historical strandings

In the 20th Century (see Figure 1) there is a large quantity of records in the 1930s thanks mainly to the work of Braga (1940) and Nobre (1900, 1935, 1937, 1938) who were naturalists of the early 20th Century. Their dedicated work to zoology was registered in scientific journals of the time. The fact that this information, usually given by local fishing communities, reached these naturalists, allowed for the recording and publishing of these strandings and they became an important source of information for historical studies.

Some of the records are reported often with illustrations to confirm the correct identification of the species and in many cases the information was confronted and confirmed with the help of naturalists abroad. Despite that, occasionally species were not correctly identified, for instance, *Balaenoptera physalus* was first misidentified as *Balaenoptera musculus* (Anon, 1723; Nobre, 1937, 1938; Braga, 1940) and only 20 years later was correctly identified as a fin whale by Teixeira (1979). Also, Nobre (1935) has incorrectly identified the individual as a pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*) which was correctly identified later on (Fraser, 1950) as a false killer whale (*Pseudorca crasidens*) and this constituted the first record of this species for mainland Portugal. This correct identification was only possible because photographs were taken at the scene which demonstrated the important contribution of photography in documenting these events.

In September 1917 a whale stranded in Costa de Mira (Aveiro), it was found by fishermen who used the soft tissues and left the whale skeleton. Osório (1909) having first identified the whale as a sperm whale was later able to correctly identify it as a beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*) using skeleton analysis.

On 9 September 1935, Nobre (1935) described an animal that was found in Sines harbour. According to the harbour master the whale was seen from shore while it was feeding. The whale was

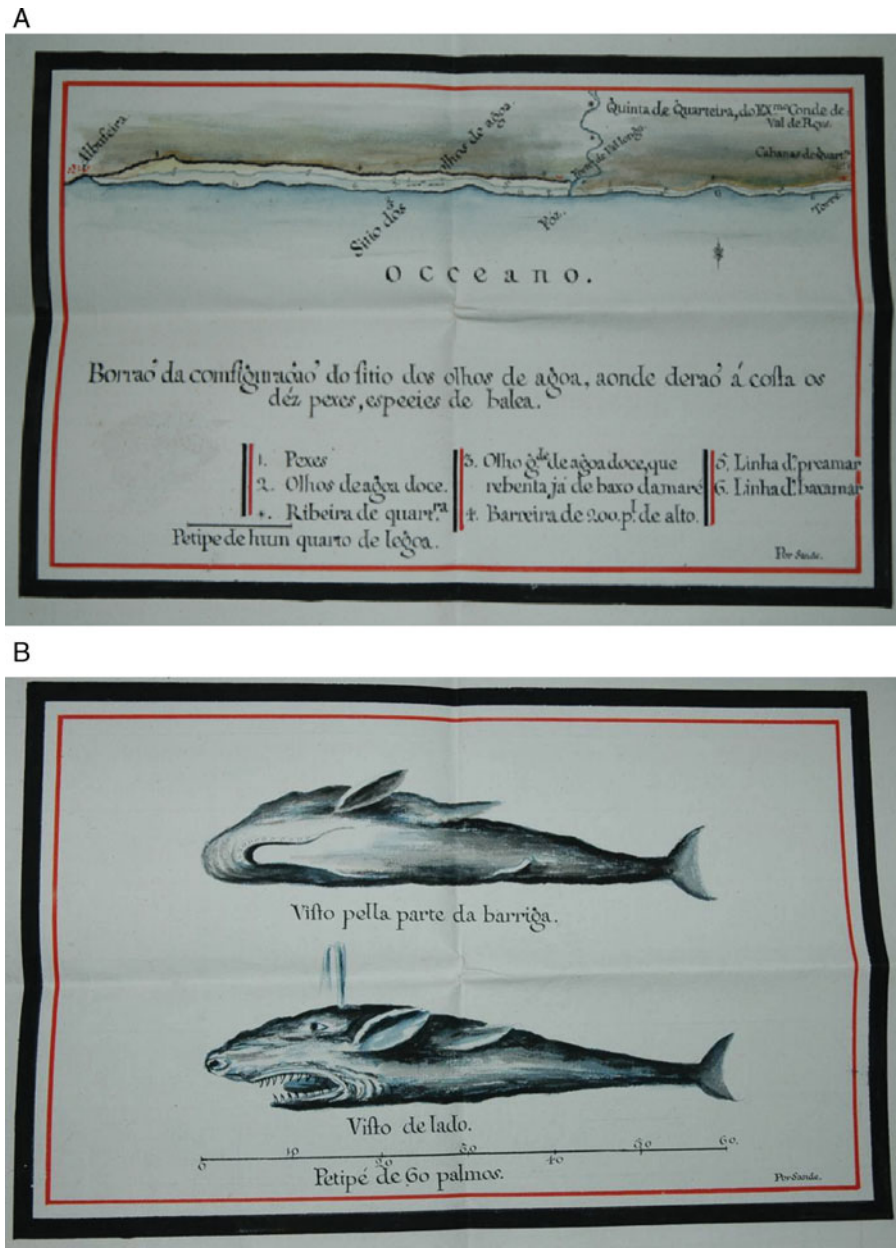


Fig. 3. Watercolour representing (A) the location of a mass stranding of ten *Physeter macrocephalus* and (B) the representation of an individual of this event in 1784 by Sande.

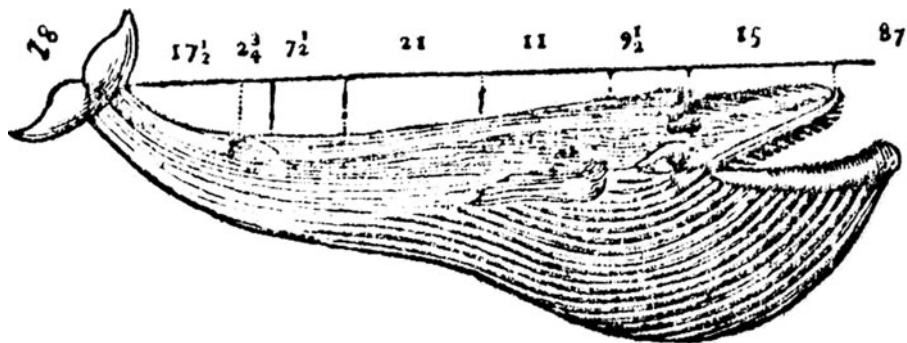


Fig. 4. Representation of the *Balaenoptera physalus* that stranded in Cacilhas in January 1723.

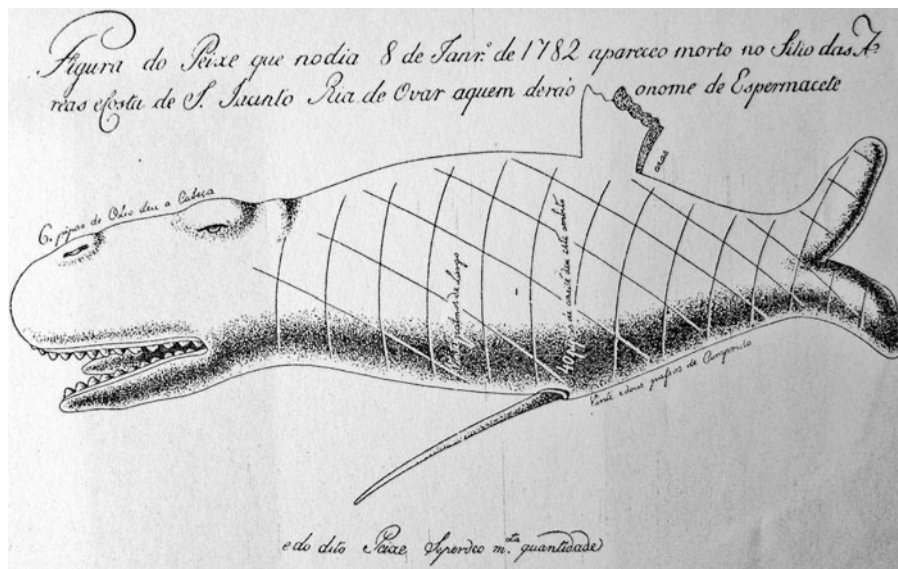


Fig. 5. Representation of a *Physeter macrocephalus* that stranded in Aveiro on 8 January 1782.

then shot by the harbour master who stated that 'its bones were so thick, that the bullets were crushed near the bones as if they were fired onto a rock'. In the whale's stomach were found 'squids and other fishes' and it provided 200 kg of oil.

In 1937 the local newspapers of Oporto noticed that a baleote (small whale) had stranded in Praia do Paraíso (Matosinhos). According to Nobre (1938) 'the population was curious and gathered around this stranding site, and some thousands of people came from the surrounding villages to see the happening'.

The naturalists Braga and Nobre joined the population to collect the skeleton for the Zoology Institute Museum. It is important to mention that the whale was auctioned by the fiscal delegation of the harbour and the museum was admitted as a bidder like any other. In the end the carcass was sold to an individual who 'used the oil and meat of the animal, and then offered the skeleton to the museum as the individual was aware of its importance' (Nobre, 1938).

In the 1940s no historical record was found, probably due to the Second World War when attention was given to captured or harpooned cetaceans as those were for meat (Brito, 2008). In the 1960s there was again an increase in records, which continue to grow through the 1970s due mainly to the work of Teixeira. Teixeira's work contributed a large quantity of records due to an active search for strandings, accompanied by more detailed stranding information. This author accumulated information on strandings (Figure 6) but also on captures and occurrences (Teixeira, 1979).

DISCUSSION

Most historical sources about the erratic occurrence of cetaceans are from whaling or stranding records. Descriptions are often, but not always, accompanied by illustrations which were usually based on drawings made on the spot. These are indications of their author's inquiring minds and reveal an interest from the public in general, even at that time, about these rare but outstanding events (Barthelmess & Svanberg, 2006). In the earliest records found, whales that stranded ashore were considered truly marine monsters, for the size and strangeness

they presented. Sometimes the mundane retained the magical and the animal intruded upon or threatened the human world. Whales, perhaps more than any other animal, existed in a multiplicity of meanings in early modern thought. They were good to eat, but bad to encounter, both fascinating and frightening even when dead on shore (Szabo, 2008). There are records about whales being a source of valuable commodities that could be made from their blubber, meat, bones, baleen and teeth, and strandings were events worth recording for future generations. Thus from about the end of the European Middle Ages, stranding records started gradually to become more frequent (Barthelmess, 2003).

The amount of early historical data for mainland Portugal is not very large but is indicative of a great diversity of species occurrence. The fact that most of the old stranding records corresponded to large whales (sperm and fin whales) may be indicative that only large animals would retain people's interest and inquisitiveness and be preserved both in oral and written history. In the majority of the strandings, the records describe species that were uncommon and probably never sighted before. Besides the long time-span and number of historical strandings, records are directly related to the effort and the number of people involved in cataloguing these events throughout this period of time. On many occasions when the whale was trapped or weak, the coastal communities led it to shallow waters provoking its stranding and death to take advantage of its resources such as oil, meat, fat and bones. The fear of these events was gradually replaced by an interest in the representation of strandings, where the images began to be more descriptive and focused on more detailed aspects of the stranded animal as shown in this work.

For early naturalists, strandings made an important contribution as a potential source of knowledge for these cetacean species that in the 18th Century were still largely unknown. Thus the first knowledge of cetacean species and their occurrence was based on anecdotes surrounding these strandings. During the 18th Century artists lacked a good knowledge about the anatomy of species which probably resulted in their drawings and paintings having distorted perspectives, misrepresentations and some of the animal parts being imperceptible. As the 18th Century progressed an interest in cetacean strandings

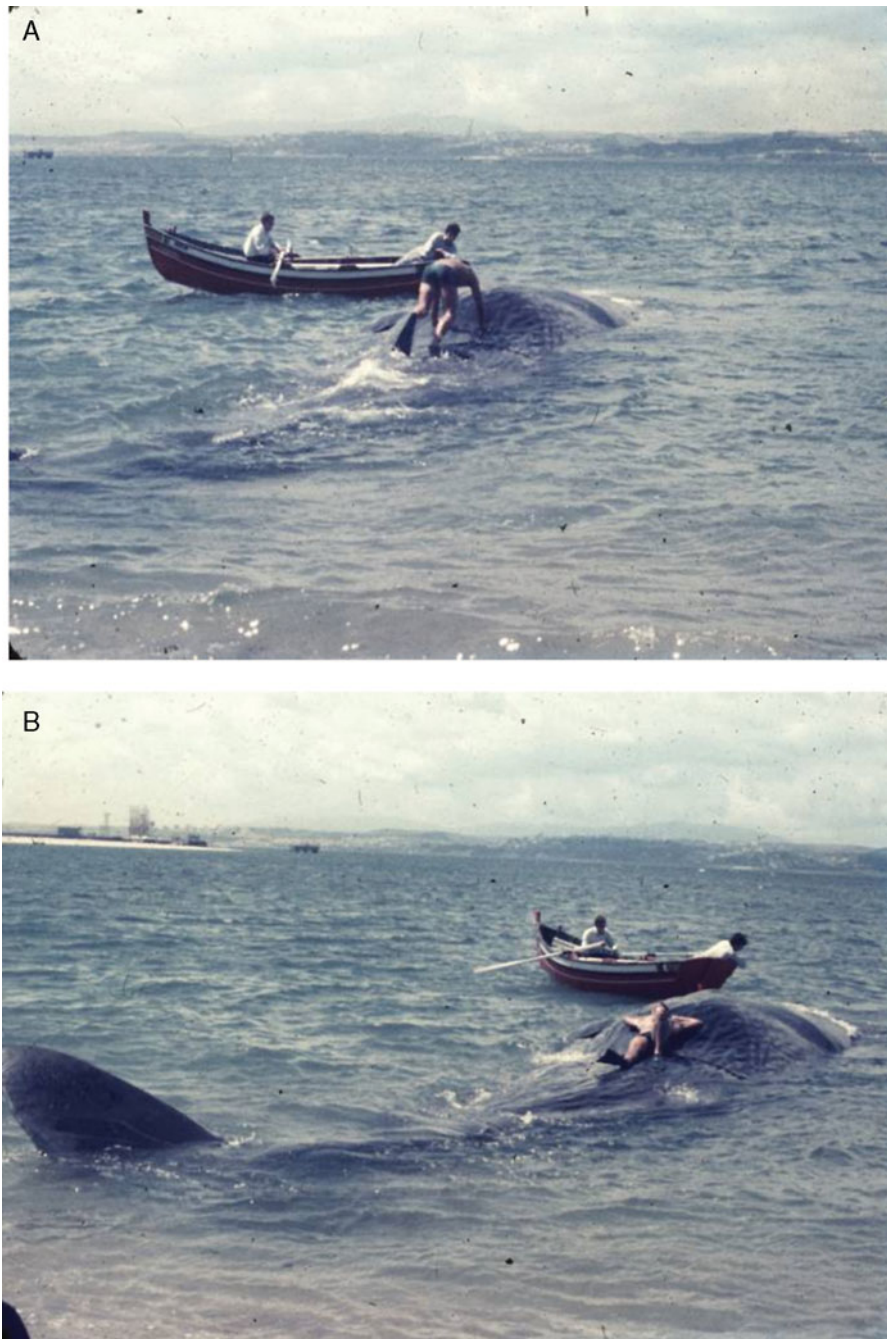


Fig. 6. Photographs of a stranding at Trafaria, which probably corresponds to the stranding of 22 May 1971 recorded by Teixeira (1979) (see Appendix). Credits to Carlos Carvalho.

by naturalists arose with a significant improvement in the detail and descriptions that accompanied drawings. Although in the 18th Century local people were unaware of the scientific considerations, they could identify the differences between a whale and a fish and could recognize that there were significant differences when compared with other marine animals.

The quantity of the records in the 19th and early 20th Centuries is related to places where fishing communities were established, whilst in the second half of the 20th Century the work of naturalists such as Nobre, Braga and Seabra was of great importance. These naturalists recorded stranding events in scientific journals of the time, based on the information gathered from popular anecdotes, and in most cases showed the

species correct identification. This states a clear interest in the scientific potential of the strandings and shows collaboration between people using the whale's resources and people studying them. For instance, in 1937 the whale that stranded in Praia do Paraíso, demonstrates that although at the time the bidder used all the whale's resources he also realized the importance of that unique and strange animal to the museum and to science. In the 1970s the work of Teixeira was very significant in recording these events and his specific dedication to collecting these data was extremely relevant for the quantity and quality of the information gathered.

Such as in other regions (e.g. Barthelmess & Svanberg, 2009), historical strandings of large whales have not received

adequate attention in cetological literature. These records provide an important resource to understand species' occurrence through time and it is very helpful to managers and conservationists that are trying to evaluate cetacean populations' status (Parsons, 2004), and nowadays give an important contribution to the study of zoology and mammalogy in Portugal.

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Appendix. Records of 38 historical strandings indicating number, date, species, number of animals, location, relevant stranding information. Sex and total length (TL) are presented as well as misidentifications.

Date	Species	No.	Location	Relevant stranding information	References
1526	Large whale	1	Peniche (Areia Branca)	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Soledade (1705)
January 1723	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1	Cacilhas	Female; TL = 26.51 m	Anon (1723)
8 January 1782	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	Aveiro (São Jacinto shore)	Male; TL unknown	Anon (1945)
1784	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	10	Albufeira (Olhos de Água)	TL = 4.57 m	Sande (1784)
1871	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1	Póvoa de Varzim	Sex unknown; TL = 20 m	Teixeira (1977)
1896	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	1	Setúbal	Sex unknown; TL = 97 cm	Nobre (1900)
30 March 1895	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	1	Figueira da Foz (Buarcos)	Female; TL = 106 cm	Oliveira & Vieira (1896)
18 February 1896	Large whale	1	Ericeira	Sex unknown; TL = 22 m	Anon. (1896)
1897	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	1	Porto (Foz do Douro beach)	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Nobre (1900)
23 October 1904	<i>Kogia breviceps</i>	1	Cascais	Sex unknown; TL = 147 cm	Nobre (1938)
1905	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	1	Setúbal	Female; TL = 317 cm	Seabra (1907)
1905	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	1	Setúbal	Female; TL = 284 cm	Seabra (1907)
September 1917	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	1	Aveiro (Mira shore)	Sex unknown; TL = 515 cm; first identified as <i>P. macrocephalus</i>	Osório (1909)
1926	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	Póvoa de Varzim (Aguçadoira)	Sex unknown; TL = 18 m	Nobre (1935)
1926	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	1	Portuguese coast	Foetus; TL = 155 cm	Teixeira (1977)
9 September 1935	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>	1	Sines	Male; TL = 6 m; weight = 1000 kg; first identified as <i>G. melas</i>	Nobre (1935)
7 April 1936	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1	Quarteira	Sex unknown; TL = 22.50 m; first identified as <i>B. musculus</i>	Nobre (1937)
May 1936	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1	Setúbal (Comenda beach)	Sex unknown; TL unknown; first identified as <i>B. musculus</i>	Braga (1940)
19 November 1937	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1	Porto (Paraíso beach)	Male; TL = 13.80 m; first identified as <i>B. musculus</i>	Nobre (1938)
May 1938	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	Póvoa do Varzim	Sex unknown; TL = 15 m	Braga (1940)
August 1938	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1	Porto (Aguda beach)	Sex unknown; TL = 1300 cm; first identified as <i>B. musculus</i>	Braga (1940)
25 June 1956	<i>Kogia breviceps</i>	1	Setúbal	Calf; TL = 123.5 cm; weight = 20 kg	Figueiredo (1956)
25 June 1956	<i>Kogia breviceps</i>	1	Setúbal	Female; TL = + 2 m; weight = 400 - 500 kg	Figueiredo (1956)
1964	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	Estoril (Azarujinha beach)	Sex unknown; TL = 10 m	Teixeira (1979)
1965	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	1	Peniche	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Teixeira (1979)
1968	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	1	Sines	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Teixeira (1979)
22 May 1971	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	Trafaria (Torrão beach)	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Teixeira (1979)
1974	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	1	Setúbal (Cape Espichel)	Sex unknown; TL = 27 cm	Teixeira (1979)
1975	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	1	Peniche	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Teixeira (1979)
August 1976	<i>Globicephala</i> sp.	1	Portimão	Sex unknown; TL unknown	Teixeira (1979)
22 February 1977	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	1	Peniche (Areia Branca)	Probably female; TL = 555 cm	Teixeira (1979)
2 April 1977	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	1	Peniche (Porto Dinheiro)	Male; TL = 520 cm	Teixeira (1979)
3 April 1977	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	1	Carcavelos	Female; TL = 308 cm	Teixeira (1977)
9 April 1977	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	1	Trafaria	Sex unknown; TL = 160 cm	Teixeira (1979)
10 June 1977	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	1	Porto (Apúlia)	Probably male; TL = 500 cm	Teixeira (1979)
28 June 1977	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	1	Porto (Leixões)	Sex unknown; TL = 160 cm; weight = 55 kg	Teixeira (1979)
15 August 1977	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	1	Porto (Anção)	Sex unknown; TL = 170 cm	Teixeira (1979)
10 September 1977	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	Peniche (Foz do Arelho)	Male; TL = 6 m	Teixeira (1979)