

## **AN ABNORMAL CALF OF HUMPBACK WHALE OBSERVED OFF RURUTU ISLAND (FRENCH POLYNESIA)**

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**INTRODUCTION** The islands of French Polynesia host a wintering population of southern humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* during the July-November period (Poole, 1993; Gannier, 1998). Female/calf pairs can be seen in the Australes and Society archipelagos, as well as around some islands of the Tuamotus and the Marquesas. A small scale commercial whale-watching is operated since 1997 in Rurutu (Australes Islands). One of the four calves seen regularly in 1998 was remarkable for several external features.

**METHODS** The Raie Manta Club is a scuba diving club with a seasonal base in Rurutu. It provides the opportunity to observe humpback whales during the calving period. Two tours are organised daily with one small boat, equipped with in-board engines. Up to 12 passengers can be accommodated, but an average of five is achieved. The crew includes two qualified guides and the skipper. Snorkel swimming is proposed to volunteers tourists when suitable sea conditions and animals behavior allow safe underwater observation. In 1998, the tour focused on the sites mostly favoured by the whales: the Moerai and Avera bays and the north coast inshore waters. One unusual calf was seen along its (supposed) mother from 15 August (figure 1), when it was assumed to be 5-5.5 meters long, to 20 October, when it was estimated to reach a length of 7-8 meters. The (supposed) mother of this calf was a « classic » humpback whale, well identifiable because of a white patch on top of the back. A description of the unusual features is supported by many good quality underwater pictures and some video footage.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE ABNORMAL CALF** The overall shape was found to be close to that of a rorqual, with a robust tail stock, although a number of external features were characteristic of the humpback whale. About thirty ventral grooves were counted and a long slit is visible from the umbilic to the anal region. No mammary slit was visible in the genital region. A short flipper was estimated to be 1/5 of the body length (from photogrametry), with much attenuated knobs. A relative length of about 1/3 of body length is more characteristic for the species (Evans, 1987), as can be seen on the picture of a normal calf. The broad chord rorqual-shaped flukes do not feature the trailing edge knobs. A high and very falcate dorsal fin, without the usual hump, was found to be different from that of the majority of humpback whales. The head was rather typical of a young humpback whale, but the knobs were quite attenuated on top of the head and on the sides of the mouth, as was the « barbet » protuberance at the tip of the jaw. A mottled pigmentation was apparent over much of the body, excepted in a thin ventral area. Unusual behaviors were recorded during the period, the individual being found to be very friendly by comparison with other calves in the area. During the period, the calf was observed suckling 20-30 times every day, each « session » lasting a few seconds. The most remarkable behavior was perhaps the « gulping » attitude frequently displayed after suckling. The baleen plates were not unlike those of other humpback whales.

**DISCUSSION** This calf may be an abnormal breed from regular humpback whale parents. It might also be an hybrid from the female humpback and a male of an unknown rorqual species. Interspecific breeding between balaenopterid whales has been recently documented by genetic studies, noticeably between *Balaenoptera physalus* and *B. musculus* (Bérubé and Aguilar, 1998). The successful breeding between two different genera of baleen whales is not mentioned in the literature. But successful breeding is known to have occurred between different genera of delphinids, *Pseudorca crassidens* and *Tursiops truncatus*, for example (Nishiwaki and Tobayama, 1984).

Because no biological sample has been collected, it is impossible to ascertain whether this calf was an hybrid or not. Future sightings of the specimen may provide opportunities to collect skin samples.

#### REFERENCES

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