

The lost Atlantic humpback whales – is West Africa home to an undiscovered Eastern Atlantic breeding population?

Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) belong to highly structured populations; travelling between discrete low latitude breeding grounds and high latitude feeding grounds. Although the recovery of *some* humpback populations has been hailed a great conservation success story, other populations remain perilously threatened (e.g. Cape Verde population numbers just 235 individuals). There are two known breeding grounds in the North Atlantic Ocean: the West Indies and Cape Verde Islands. Genetic data and population estimates indicate that other populations probably exist, however their location still eludes us. Based on whaling records and the presence of suitable habitat, it is proposed that an undiscovered breeding ground may exist somewhere between Morocco and Guinea Bissau; this area is remote, challenging and in much need of dedicated research effort.

Map: Locations where whaling ships caught humpback whales (and/or right whales) in the North Atlantic during the 19th century. The two only known breeding grounds are indicated. From Smith and Reeves (2003).



Humpback whale calf breaching © Anna Cucknell

Acoustic and visual surveys of continental shelf waters will be conducted between Morocco and Guinea Bissau in search of breeding humpback whales (and other species such as blue, fin, minke, sei and Bryde's whales, harbour porpoises and monk seals). Data will also be collected on seabirds, sharks, turtles, fishing activities, as well as anthropogenic noise levels. Photo-identification of individual whales and analysis of song recordings will be used to test whether whales belong to a distinct population. Our partners and collaborators include universities, Government scientists and other NGOs, in this bold and potentially ground-breaking project.

