

TANZANIA WHALE NETWORK

MAY 2021

2020 WHALE REPORT

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Humpback whale surfaces off the west coast of Zanzibar on 28th Aug 2020. Photo credit: Katya Kalashnikova

WHALE RECORDS 2020

In 2020, 109 different reports of humpback whales, comprising a total of 344 individuals, were reported to the Tanzania Whale Network. A total of 61 calves were reported, comprising 18% of all sighted whales.

The first reported sighting of the year was on the 10th July, and the last confirmed sighting was on 31st Oct. By far the largest number of whale sighting records (211, 61% of the total) were in August. The largest number of whales reported in a single day was 18 animals recorded on 23rd July, 6th August and 23rd August.

The largest number of whale records were from Mtwara and Zanzibar. This likely reflects the larger number of observers in those locations, not necessarily larger numbers of whales.

HUMPBACK WHALES

Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) are present in Tanzanian waters from June to November each year. They spend the austral summer months (Nov-March) in Antarctica feeding and make the long migration to give birth and mate in the relatively safe, warm tropical waters of East Africa. Now that whale hunting has largely ceased, humpback whale populations in East Africa are believed to be steadily increasing in number, and, as a consequence, humpback whale sightings in Tanzania and other nearby regions are becoming more common.



Humpback whale sighted off the northern tip of Mafia in Oct 2020
Photo credit: Sean Darnborough



Humpback whale south of Mafia on 13th Aug 2020. Photo credit: David, Mafia Island Diving

GROUP HISTORY & MEMBERSHIP

The Tanzanian Whale Network was formed in June 2018. The Network is an informal group of people who are frequently on the ocean that report sightings of humpback whales in Tanzanian waters. Membership of the group at the end of 2020 was 108 individuals, increasing slightly from 93 individuals at the end of 2018 and similar to the 107 members in 2019. It includes most of the divers, recreational fishermen, sailors and water sports operators in the country. Also included are some marine park managers, marine biologists, conservationists, and fisheries specialists etc. Members live across the entire country, but there are large numbers from Mafia, Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam and fewer from Tanga and Mtwara/Lindi. Anyone can be a member of the WhatsApp group.

COMPARISON OF 2018, 2019 & 2020 SEASONS

In 2018, 467 whales were recorded by the Tanzania Whale Network, compared to only 47 whales in 2019 and 344 in 2020. Although the number of recorders on the network is similar between years, in 2020 many whale records were newly submitted by Mnazi Bay Marine Park staff which increased the reporting from that region dramatically making interannual comparisons challenging. If the Mtwara records are removed it appears likely that 2018 was a year with a large number of whales, 2019 with very few and 2020 with a moderate number. The temporal pattern of records was similar between years with most whales recorded in August. In 2020 whales were documented to be present in Tanzania for 16 weeks, in 2018 for 29 weeks, and in 2019 for 13 weeks.



A humpback whale tail photographed near Mafia Island on 13th Aug 2020. Photo Credit: David, Mafia Island Diving

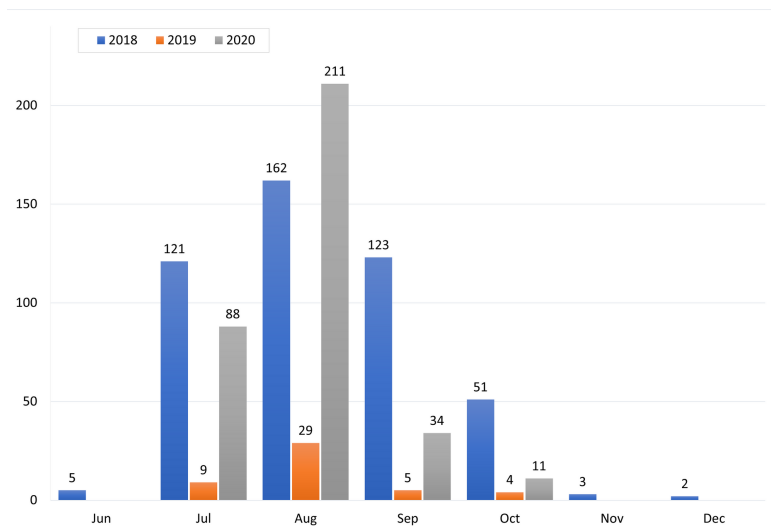


Figure 1: Total humpback whale reports per month from 2018, 2019 and 2020

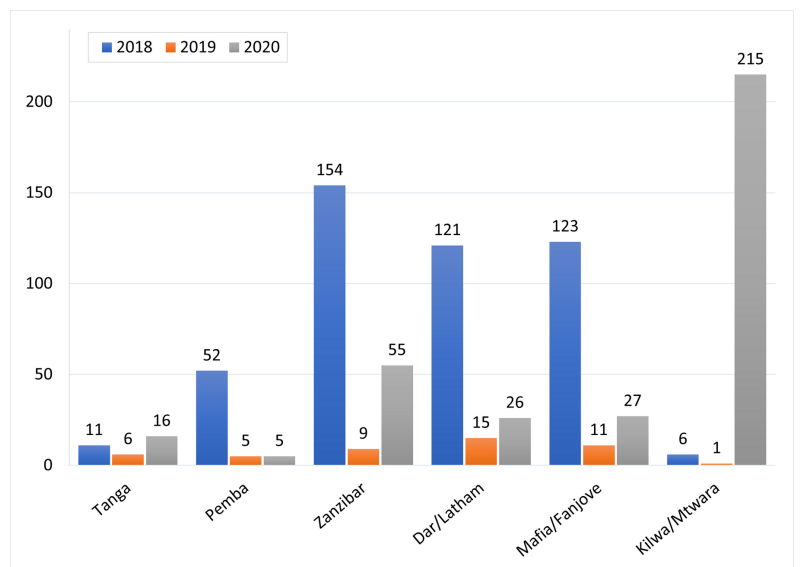


Figure 2: Humpback whale reports by Tanzanian region, North to South, from 2018, 2019 and 2020 (Reporting effort in Mtwara increased dramatically in 2020).