

TANZANIA WHALE NETWORK

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2021 WHALE REPORT

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Humpback whale surfacing near Makunduchi (Mtende) on August 7th, 2021. Photo credit: Katya Kalashnikova.

WHALE RECORDS 2021

In 2021, 19 different reports of humpback whales, comprising a total of 47 individuals, were made to the Tanzania Whale Network. A total of two calves were reported, comprising 4% of all sighted whales.

The first reported sighting of the year was on July 21st and the last confirmed sighting was on October 1st. The month of August held the most whale sightings (33 individuals, 70% of the total). The largest number of whales reported in a single day was 10 animals recorded on August 3rd 2022 off the coasts of Zanzibar.

The largest number of whale records were from Mafia 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 relatively safe, warm tropical waters, which include those in East Africa. Whale hunting has now largely ceased and humpback whale populations worldwide are recovering, and numbers are increasing.

Humpback whales are sighted regularly in Tanzania but the numbers vary considerably from year-to-year. In Tanzania the humpback whales are subject to threats from collision with high speed ferries, underwater noise and entanglement in fishing gear.

Humpback whale fluke spotted in Kisimkazi August 7th, 2021.
Photo credit: Katya Kalashnikova.



A humpback whale's exuberant peduncle throw in Mtwara on July 30th, 2021. Photo credit: Katya Kalashnikova.

REPORTS OF CALVES

Humpback whale calves have typically comprised between 5 and 15 % of the whales spotted during each Tanzanian whale season (Figure 2). The high number of calves documented in 2020 is likely because of more reporters from Mtwara collecting data in that year. Dedicated data from Mtwara was not available for any other reporting year. In general, during years where more whales were reported, (2018 and 2020) the proportion of those records that were calves was also higher. Likewise in years with few whales, the proportion of calves was lower (2019 and 2021).



A newborn calf off Mnazi Bay Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park on July 21st, 2021. Photo credit: Katya Kalashnikova.

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 2021 was 132 individuals, increasing from 108 people in 2020, 107 in 2019 and 93 individuals at the end of 2018. It includes most of the locally resident 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. Tourists are not typically members of the group, but many sightings are reported from the operators of trips that had tourists on board. 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.

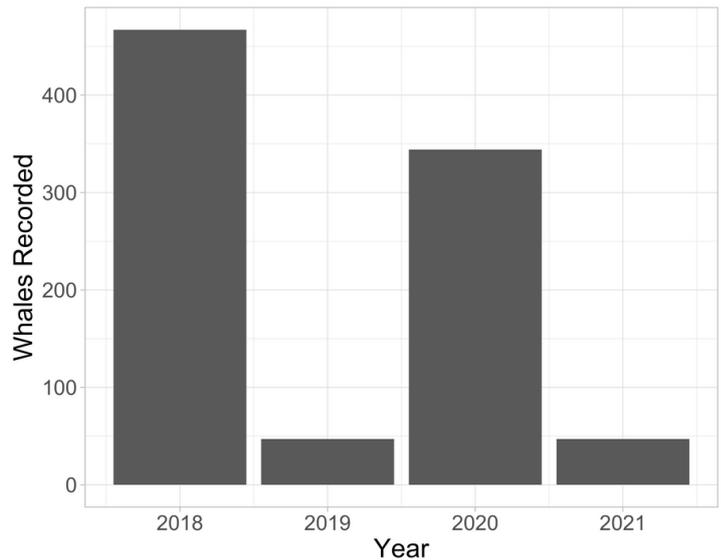


Figure 1: Total number of humpback whale individuals reported to the Tanzania Whale Network from 2018 to 2021.

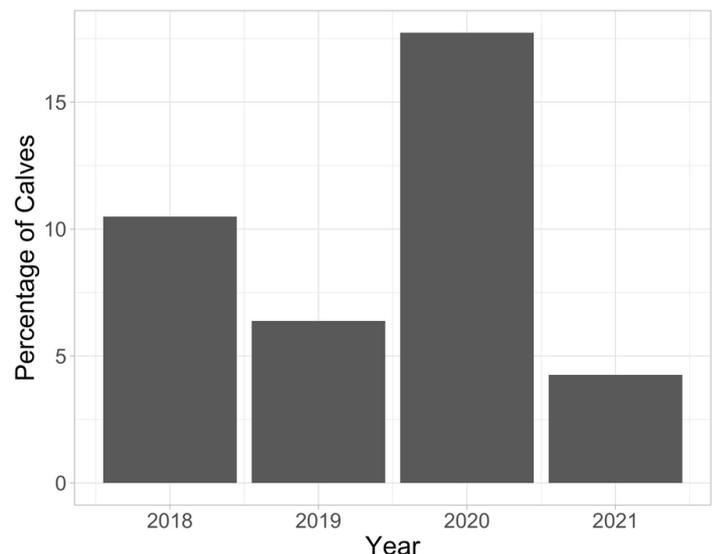


Figure 2: Proportion of humpback whales reported to the Tanzania Whale Network from 2018 to 2021 that were calves.

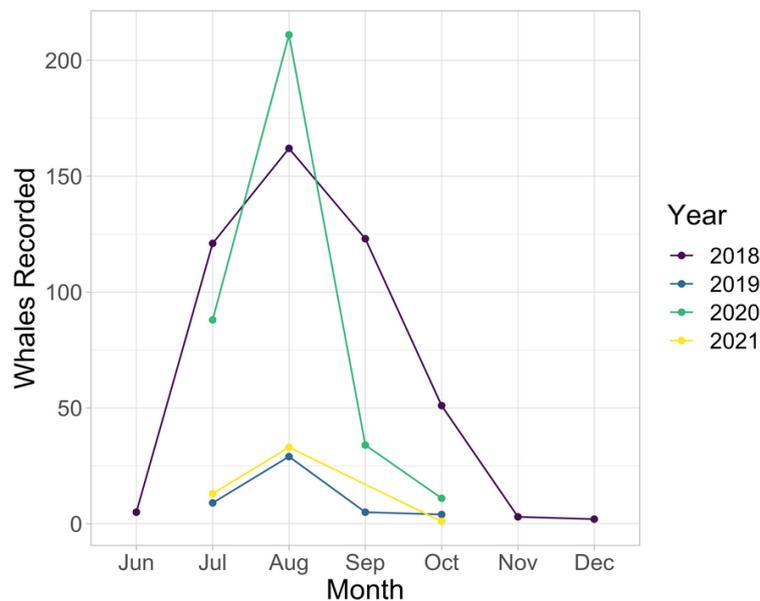


Figure 3: Number of whales (adults and calves combined) recorded each month throughout the 2021 season. 2018 is purple, 2019 is blue, 2020 is green, and 2021 is yellow.

COMPARISON OF 4 YEARS OF WHALE SIGHTINGS

In 2018, 467 whales were reported to the Tanzania Whale Network, sightings dropped to 47 whales in 2019, increased to 344 in 2020, and then dropped down again to 47 in 2021 (Figure 1). 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, 2020 with a moderate number and 2021 with few reports.

The temporal pattern of records was similar between years with most whales reported in August. Whales were recorded as present in Tanzania for 9 weeks in 2021, they were present for 16 weeks in 2020, 29 weeks in 2018, and in 2019 for 13 weeks. However, in 2021 there were no whales reported in September and then just a single animal in October.

In 2018, the first whale report was in early June and whales were reported into December, but for the following three years, sightings began in July and stopped in October. Without a standardization of effort in reporting, it is difficult to make conclusions about the trends in whale numbers within Tanzanian waters, however the citizen science information generated is very useful. Continuing to monitor these gentle giants from our shores and boats will help us better understand the relative numbers and patterns of whales in Tanzania, especially when we compare with neighboring countries. *Keep those eyes on the ocean and ready for the next season!*



A humpback whale displays a peduncle throw near Mtwara on July 30th, 2021. Photo Credit: Katya Kalashnikova.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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