

# ATTEMPT TO RESCUE A PYGMY SPERM WHALE, *KOGIA BREVICEPS*, (de Blainville 1838) STRANDED ALIVE IN MADEIRA ISLAND



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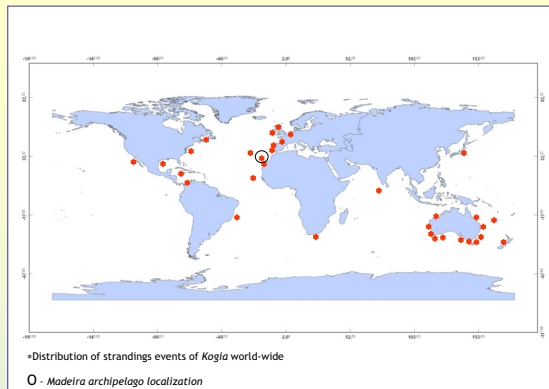
## INTRODUCTION

Information on the biology of the pygmy sperm whale, *Kogia breviceps* is scarce and many of its aspects are insufficiently known. This is due mainly to the difficulty of detection, identification at sea and its close similarity in appearance to dwarf sperm whale (*Kogia sima* Owen, 1866) with which is easily mistaken. Data regarding both species are usually lumped and mostly limited to information gathered on strandings. *Kogia* are oceanic whales widely distributed in tropical and temperate waters worldwide (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1989) and are now recognized as the only two members of the Family Kogiidae (Rice 1998). Several cases of rescue and rehabilitation of pygmy sperm whales in captivity were reported in literature and referred as an exceeding difficult task, however there's a report of a live stranding of *Kogia sima* in the nearby Azores Islands, on the summer of 1996, apparently successfully rescued, which was also the first record of the species for the Azores (Gonçalves *et al.*, 1996). Thus, any contribution related to the presence, general biology or stranding event, particularly alive stranding as the present case, is of particular relevance.

## AIMS

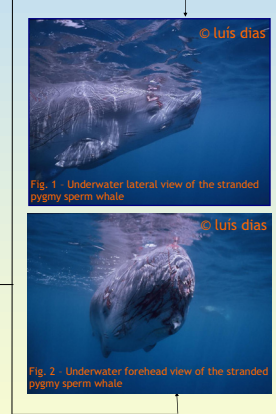
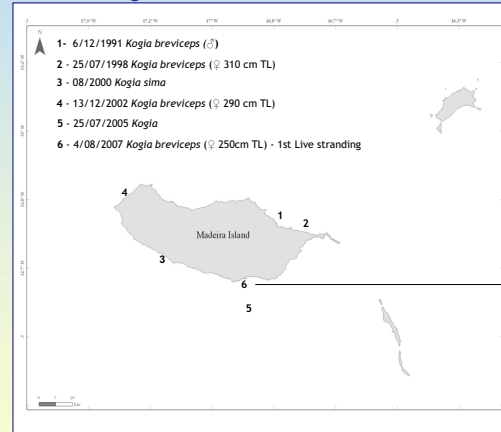
- 1- Provide information obtained from the attempted rescue of a *Kogia breviceps*, presenting a description of the behaviours observed;
- 2- Present the first record of a live strand of a pygmy sperm whale in Madeira Island;

## *Kogia* Strandings World-wide



## Madeira Stranding Network

In 1991 the Madeira Whale Museum (MWM) started to record cetacean strandings and from 1995 onwards on a systematic basis. The stranding network involves the collaboration of local and regional authorities, harbour masters, private companies and individual persons. It is presently going through a reorganization process to a more formal structure and to obtain the technical and material ability to deal with live strandings.



## METHODS

- 1° - On 3/08/2007, whale-watching operators reported the presence of a pygmy sperm whale with diving difficulties and stability/buoyancy problems, 5.5 nm off the South coast of Madeira Island (SE North Atlantic).
- 2° - On 4/08/2007, the MWM team was informed that a cetacean stranded alive on a rocky shore near Funchal harbour. It was first seen swimming against the rocks by local people and sea users around 10:00 a.m.. Promptly, rescue and maritime police boats were sent to the stranding location to keep the animal away from shore.
- 3° At 12:00 p.m. rescue attempt started. An external examination of the animal was made and due to its apparent poor physical condition it was decided to retrieve it to a secure location for recovery. Logistic conditions for animal's retrieval and transport as land facilities to accommodate temporarily the animal were prepared. A 25 person inflatable liferaft was settled up and filled with sea water to receive the animal, which was ready around 5:30 p.m..
- 4° Meanwhile, the whale was closely followed and monitored by snorkelers and from a boat at short distance. Notes were taken in a prepared data-sheet, breathing rates registered in two periods: from 3:55 to 4:45 p.m. and from 5:15 to 5:57 p.m. and photographs, including underwater, were taken. Neither blood samples nor other tissue samples were taken, since it was not possible to mobilize a veterinary to the rescue event. Underwater acoustic records were also not taken.



MWM team on the attempt of pygmy sperm whale rescue and maritime police assistance. The animal was kept on observation and guided to avoid the shore by the MWM personnel, by maritime police and Madeira Natural Park rangers from three boats at short distance. Inflatable liferaft that was settled up to receive the injured animal prepared on land.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The live specimen stranded was an adult female approximately 250 cm long with an estimated weight of 150 to 200 Kg. It presented several injuries, with skin lesions and abrasions in the forehead and sides of the body as well as sea-urchin (*Diadema antillarum*) spines imbedded in the skin (figure 1 and 2). The wounds seemed to be inflicted when the pygmy sperm whale swam against the rocks near Funchal harbour, before the rescue team reached the animal. When first seen and during the first hours, the animal showed an abnormal behaviour including signs of disorientation, no reaction to human proximity/contact, not diving, swimming very slowly even motionless at times. Breathing rates were 9.7 breaths/min with a mean apnea time of 208 min (SE=75) but, no comparison values for this species were found in literature. After 7 h accompanying the animal it dove and disappeared, leaving the authors without any indication of how successful was its apparent recovery. 1.5 h before, it started getting more active, moving slightly faster, intending to swim and attempting to dive. During 40 min the team searched the area, but it was not seen again and on the following days there's no report of this animal live or dead. Assuming this was the same animal reported on the 3/08/07 (see methods) its final behaviour/posture suggested some improvement of its condition and as far as the authors know this is the first event where a *Kogia* so debilitated showed an apparent recovery in such short period. No likely cause was identified that might caused the stranding of this pygmy sperm whale. Although the species has been firstly reported to Madeira waters in 1941 (Maul & Sergeant, 1977), this is the first recorded live stranding of *Kogia* in Madeira archipelago. The small number of recorded strandings (n=6 in 16 years) do not show any trend (seasonal or gender).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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