



First record of the pygmy killer whale (*Feresa attenuata*) in Trinidad and Tobago waters

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The pygmy killer whale (*Feresa attenuata* Gray, 1874) inhabits tropical and subtropical oceanic waters worldwide. While widespread, the species does not appear to be abundant within areas of its distribution (Jefferson *et al.*, 2008). Even when reported, many observations are considered unreliable due to the difficulty of differentiating between the pygmy killer whale and other 'blackfish', such as the melon-headed whale (*Peponocephala electra* Gray, 1846) and the false killer whale (*Pseudorca crassidens* Owen, 1846) (Jefferson *et al.*, 2008), and confirmed records are often limited to stranded animals (Bermúdez-Villapol *et al.*, 2006). As a result, the species can remain unidentified within areas of its potential distribution and continues to be listed as 'Data Deficient' on the IUCN red list¹.

Although presumed to be resident in the Wider Caribbean Region (Weir *et al.*, 2011) reports of the presence of this species in the Caribbean Sea are irregular and infrequent in most of the areas in which it is sighted. As such, new records are of great value to understanding its natural history and conservation needs in this area. Caribbean reports include both sightings and strandings in the Gulf of Mexico which was estimated to support 408 individuals in 2001 (Jefferson and Schiro, 1997; Mullin and Fulling, 2004); at least 66 sightings in Guadeloupe recorded

between 1998 and 2005^{2,3}; a mass stranding in the British Virgin Islands in 1995 (Mignucci-Giannoni *et al.*, 2000); a single stranding in Puerto Rico in 1997 (Rodríguez-López and Mignucci-Giannoni, 1999); at least one sighting off Dominica in 2006⁴; at least one sighting off Montserrat in 2008 (Weir *et al.*, 2011); a possible sighting in Martinique in 2003⁵; a skull from the St. Vincent 'blackfish' fishery in 1969 (Caldwell *et al.*, 1971); and at least three sightings and four strandings in Venezuela (Bermúdez-Villapol *et al.*, 2006). This report documents the first record of this species in the waters around Trinidad and Tobago, the southernmost island nation of the Caribbean archipelago

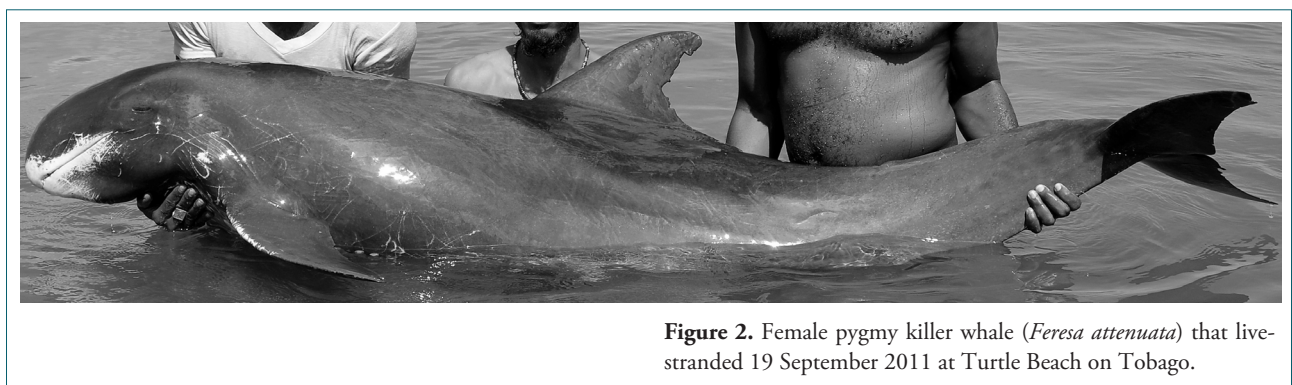
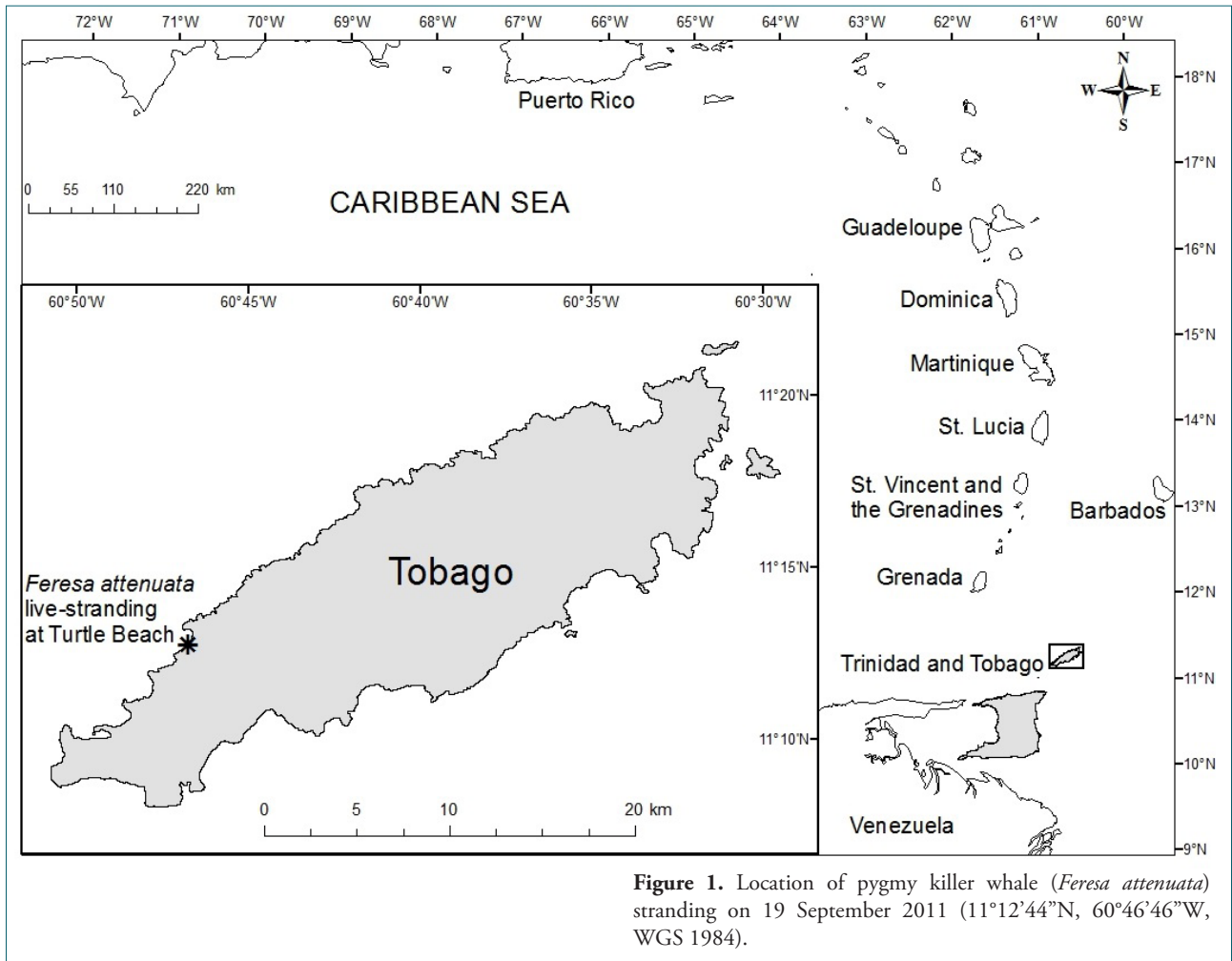
²Boisseau, O., Leaper, R. and Moscrop, A. (2006) Observations of small cetaceans in the Eastern Caribbean. Paper SC/58/SM24 presented to the Scientific Committee, International Whaling Commission, St Kitts & Nevis, May-June 2006. [Available from IWC, The Red House, 135 Station Road, Impington, Cambridge, CB24 9NP, UK, <<http://iwcoffice.org/>>].

³Rinaldi, C., Rinaldi, R. and Sahagian, P. (2006) Report of surveys conducted on small cetaceans off Guadeloupe 1998 to 2005. Paper SC/58/SM17 presented to the Scientific Committee, International Whaling Commission, St Kitts & Nevis, May-June 2006. [Available from IWC, The Red House, 135 Station Road, Impington, Cambridge, CB24 9NP, UK, <<http://iwcoffice.org/>>].

⁴Gero, S. and Whitehead, H. (2006) Opportunistic sightings of small cetaceans off the leeward shore of the Commonwealth of Dominica. Paper SC/58/SM1 presented to the Scientific Committee, International Whaling Commission, St Kitts & Nevis, May-June 2006.

⁵Jérémie, S., Gannier, A., Bourreau, S. and Nicolas, J. (2006) Cetaceans of Martinique Island (Lesser Antilles): occurrence and distribution obtained from a small boat dedicated survey. Paper SC/58/SM23 presented to the Scientific Committee, International Whaling Commission, St Kitts & Nevis, May-June 2006. [Available from IWC, The Red House, 135 Station Road, Impington, Cambridge, CB24 9NP, UK, <<http://iwcoffice.org/>>]. [Available from IWC, The Red House, 135 Station Road, Impington, Cambridge, CB24 9NP, UK, <<http://iwcoffice.org/>>].

¹Taylor, B.L., Baird, R., Barlow, J., Dawson, S.M., Ford, J., Mead, J.G., Notarbartolo di Sciarra, G., Wade, P. and Pitman, R.L. (2008) *Feresa attenuata*. The International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2014.3. <www.iucnredlist.org>. Consulted on 18 December 2014.



located just north of eastern Venezuela at the mouth of the Orinoco River.

On 19 September 2011, a single small 'blackfish' live-stranded at Turtle Beach (11°12'44"N, 60°46'46"W, WGS 1984) within Great Courland Bay on the north-western coast of the island of Tobago (Figure 1). It was first observed at 09:30h UTC (05:30h local time) milling close to shore in water 1 to 2m deep. As the whale appeared to be struggling to swim, it was attended to by a team from the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment of the Tobago House of Assembly, the Veterinary Diagnostic Unit of the

Tobago House of Assembly, a local conservation group (Save Our Sea Turtles), and local fishermen. The team included a wildlife biologist, a veterinary surgeon, and an individual trained for marine mammal stranding response.

The whale was identified as a pygmy killer whale by the species' characteristic dark grey-black body with a narrow, darker cape which dipped shallowly under a tall dorsal fin; a round head with no beak; white lips and chin; a white ventral patch; and moderately long pectoral fins (Jefferson *et al.*, 2008; Figure 2). There were several white scratches along the body near the face and deep notches on the dorsal fin



Figure 3. Close-up of dorsal fin of pygmy killer whale that live-stranded 19 September 2011 at Turtle Beach on Tobago.

(Figure 3) which appeared to be old injuries. Brief external and oral examinations revealed no noticeable entanglement, recent injuries, or skin problems. The whale was found to be a female with a total body length of 214cm, suggesting that it was an adult. Dorsal fin height (25cm) and fluke width (58.5cm) were also recorded and several photographs were taken. To reduce stress to the animal, no further data were collected. As the animal was able to swim and Trinidad and Tobago does not currently have the facilities for holding cetaceans for monitoring, the dolphin was refloated into deeper water that same day. After being carried further offshore it followed the rescue boat for several minutes before it dove, resurfaced and was able to swim away unaided. The animal was not re-sighted nor was a pygmy killer whale carcass found subsequent to this incident.

This record is the first confirmed occurrence of this species for Trinidad and Tobago and adds to the body of knowledge on the occurrence and distribution of this species in the Caribbean.

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