

RIGHT WHALES AND OTHER BALEEN WHALES STRANDINGS ON THE COAST OF SANTA CATARINA STATE, SOUTHERN BRAZIL, 2002-2009

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During the period of 2002-2009, the Brazilian Right Whale Project and the Right Whale Environmental Protection Area (RWEPA) teams collected stranding data of right whales and other baleen whales on the coast of Santa Catarina State (SC), especially on its central-southern coast, where the RWEPA is located. This is a wintering ground for right whales off southern Brazil, a population which has been recovering after being suffered from intensive commercial whaling until 1973. A total of 30 strandings of baleen whales were registered, 14 (46,6%) consisting of right whales (*Eubalaena australis*), 14 (46,6%) were other baleen whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, *B.borealis*, *B.edeni*, *B.physalus* and *Megaptera novaeangliae*) and 2 (6,8%) were non-identified species. Eight (26,6%) events were living strandings (2 right whales, 6 other baleen whales), from which 4 animals were successfully rescued (1 right whale, 3 other baleen whales). Right whales stranding events were: 3 adults, 1 subadult and 10 calves. Ten (71%) right whale strandings occurred in September, the peak abundance of the species in this region (mostly in 2003 (n=3), 2006 (n=4), 2008 (n=3)). In 2007, the increasing number of strandings and the need of a consistent and long term method for collecting data motivated the managing authority of the RWEPA to improve the communication network for stranding response in the region, involving coastal communities, research institutions, public authorities and other stakeholders. This initiative can not only contribute to a better understanding of factors underlying natural mortality but also of population trends for right whales. Stranding events of right whales are historically rare in the region, consistent with the low numbers of the species up to 1990's. However, the numbers presented here have doubled the historical records. The recent increase observed in the Brazilian right whale population indicates these numbers may be resulting from natural mortality. Notwithstanding, the potential impacts from anthropogenic threats and sources of mortalities throughout the region reinforces the need for the continuous monitoring of the stranding events.

Keywords: right whale, baleen whale, stranding