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5	Abstract title:	SPERM WHALES (<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>) AT THE GATES OF THE ALBORAN SEA: AN IMPORTANT STEP TOWARDS THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN POPULATION
6	Abstract:	Sightings of sperm whales have been reported all over the Mediterranean in the past, as well as acoustic recordings of its vocalisations. However very little is known about the abundance, distribution, social structure and migration patterns of this species in the area. Studies based on bioacoustics have suggested that there could be a “Mediterranean” population of sperm whales. The only passage for possible migrations between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Sea is the Strait of Gibraltar, but until now very little research had been conducted in this region. To test this hypothesis, research on this species was started in 1999 by a research team of Firmm España, in co-operation with Alnitak, which has been recording sightings of sperm whales in the eastern section of the Alboran Sea since 1993. Thirty-three sperm whale sightings were recorded from April to October 1999 in the Strait of Gibraltar, and 29 in the eastern section of the Alboran Sea from April to November from 1993 to 1999, totalling 62 recordings. Thirty-four of these sightings were of lone individuals, and 28 were animals encountered at distances no greater than one mile from another, in associations of 2 to 6 individuals. No calves have been observed in the Alboran Sea or the Strait of Gibraltar. The only social group with calves in Spanish Mediterranean waters have been observed north from here in the Balearic Sea, in an area known to have had a high mortality of females and calves in drift nets in recent years. From the 35 animals from which an estimation of length was obtained, 77% were larger than 12 meters, and 13% were between 9 and 12 meters length. These data suggest that a transit of at least adults and sub-adult males of sperm whales through the Strait of Gibraltar does exist.
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