

EVIDENCES OF EXCHANGES OF FIN WHALES THROUGH THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR.

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Sightings of fin whales have been reported all over the Mediterranean Sea, highlighting the Ligurian Sea as an important feeding area for this species during summer. Very little is known about possible migration patterns of this species within and out of the Mediterranean Sea, and about the wintering grounds. The only passage for possible migrations between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Sea is the Strait of Gibraltar. To test this hypothesis, research on this species started in 1998 by researchers of CIRCE in co-operation with ALNITAK, which has been recording sightings of fin whales in the eastern section of the Alboran Sea since 1994. A total of 28736 nmi have been sailed on effort in the Alboran Sea, the Strait of Gibraltar and the Gulf of Cadiz between 1992 and 2003. A total of 156 fin whale individuals were sighted in a total of 103 encounters in the whole area. The direction of swimming of the animals could be recorded in 87.37% of the encounters. The data was stratified by seasons. In autumn-winter, 77.8 % of the groups or individuals encountered were moving eastwards, towards the Mediterranean Sea, while during spring and summer, a 95.5 % of the sightings were moving westwards, towards the Atlantic Ocean. These data suggest the existence of a seasonal movement of fin whales between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea (at least in its westernmost basin).