

Short Communication

First stranding event of a Minke Whale Calf, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* Lacépède, 1804, in the Syrian Coast, Eastern Mediterranean

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Abstract: Minke whale, a member of the Sub order Mysticeti, was sighted stranded in the northern, and southern parts of eastern Mediterranean. This paper report stranding of a Minke whale in Banyas Coast of Syria, and fills the gap of the species distribution between the north and south of the eastern Mediterranean.

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Introduction

The abundance of Cetaceans has been reduced by human activities, especially entanglement in fishing gears and pollution (Inniss et al., 2016). Minke whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* (Lacépède, 1804), a member of the Sub order Mysticeti, is regarded as the smallest great whales or rorquals (Carpenter and Niem, 2001; Cooke, 2018). According to the IUCN red list, Minke whale is a species of Least Concern (LC) (Cook, 2018). It is found in summer as far north as Baffin Bay in the Canadian Arctic, Denmark, Strait, Franz Josef Land, and Novaya Zemlya; while the wintering grounds are poorly known but extend at least to the Caribbean in the west and the Straits of Gibraltar in the east. Very little is known about its distribution in the Mediterranean where it is considered merely a visitor, even though it was sighted stranded in the northern (Öztürk et al., 2015) and in the southern (Kerem et al., 2012) parts of eastern Mediterranean; it had not been seen in the Syrian marine water before (Maio et al., 2016). Here we report for the first time in Syria stranding of a Minke whale in Banyas Coast. This record fills the gap of the species distribution between the north and south of the eastern Mediterranean.

Materials and Methods

On 8 March 2020, a stranded dead Minke whale calf was found on the coast south of Banyas, Syria, (35°05'45.1"N, 35°53'17.8"E). It was identified according to Carpenter and Niem (2001), Perrin et al. (2009) and Jefferson et al. (2015). Its measurements were recorded (to the nearest cm; Table 1) and 80 photographs of various parts of the body were taken for future records and data sharing with the scientific community. The young whale's corpse was then buried for later recovery of the skeleton and future display at the biodiversity museum of the High Institute of Marine Research in Lattakia.

Results and Discussions

The stranded individual was a female calf of the Minke whale (Fig. 1a, b). Its carcass was in a good condition (Category 2; Mazzariol et al., 2015). It had a streamlined body with short and pointed head (Fig. 1c), slightly protruding lower jaw and creamy baleen plates with white bristles. A conspicuous white patch is located on the middle of the upper surface of the flippers (Fig. 1d). The fluke was slightly concave with a well-marked median notch (Fig. 1e) and the dorsal fin having a sickle shape (Fig. 1f). The morphometric

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Figure 1. A female minke whale calf, stranded at Banyas coast, Syria: (a) General body shape, (b) female genital area, (c) short and pointed head, (d) white patch on the flippers, (e) concave fluke with median notch, and (f) sickle shaped dorsal fin.

measurements of this individual indicate that it is a calf, as the total body length was only 3.5 m (Van Waerebeek et al., 1999), while reportedly adults generally reach just over 9 m (Öztürk et al., 2011).

The death of this calf was very recent as it was still bleeding on the time of sighting. This was considered as an indication that this calf was present in the Syrian marine waters and had not been brought by water currents from other nearby areas of the Mediterranean. This was later confirmed by a local fisherman who reported that this whale calf was entangled in his trammel net (8 m height, 300 m length) which was set-up at ~15 m water depth and ~300 m off the shoreline.

Balaenoptera acutorostrata had been recorded earlier at the southern part (Kerem et al., 2012), and the northern part (Öztürk et al., 2015) of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and this new record fills the gap in the species distribution along this coast. The Minke whale exists in all latitudes of both

hemispheres and inhabits the polar and sub polar waters. Individuals of the north Atlantic populations occasionally visit the Mediterranean, mostly during winter, to benefit from the warmer waters (Van Waerebeek et al., 1999, Fraija-Fernández et al., 2015, Öztürk et al., 2015, Maio et al., 2016). Recording this stranded calf in the Syrian waters supports the idea that the eastern Mediterranean may be a potential calving and/or nursery ground for the Minke whale. Even though this species is regarded as Least Concern (Cooke, 2018), national and regional initiatives should be taken (Gonzalvo and Bearzi, 2008) to protect habitats of this species because it is already facing various threats.

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Table 1. Measurements of the minke whale specimen stranded on the coast south of Banyas, Syria.

Factors	Measurement (cm)
Length From tip of lower jaw to fluke notch	350
From tip of lower jaw to anus	295
From tip of lower jaw to genital opening	290
From tip of lower jaw to anterior margin of dorsal fin	250
From tip of lower jaw to anterior margin of pectoral fin	103
From tip of lower jaw to posterior corner of mouth gape	35
From tip of lower jaw to eye	65
Length of snout	35
Length of caudal fin	28
Span (maximum width) of caudal fins	77
Height of dorsal fin	15
Length of pectoral fin along anterior margin	52
Width of pectoral fin base	13

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