

**Agenda Item 4.7: Issues specifically related to the conservation  
of *Tursiops truncatus***

**On the occurrence of the bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*  
in Belgian waters**

**Submitted by: Belgium**



**NOTE:**

**IN THE INTERESTS OF ECONOMY, DELEGATES ARE KINDLY REMINDED TO BRING  
THEIR OWN COPIES OF THESE DOCUMENTS TO THE MEETING**



# On the occurrence of the bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* in Belgian waters

Submitted by Belgium

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## Introduction

No systematic recording of stranded cetaceans was undertaken in Belgium before the 1970s or even the 1980s. Only few stranded animals found their way to researchers or to scientific collections. Even in the beginning of the 1990s it is possible that some strandings were not recorded. However, strandings or catches of conspicuous cetaceans, or of cetaceans inland, were often recorded (in press or other publications). Overviews of strandings and sightings of cetaceans in Belgium have been published by DE SMET (1974;1981), who included historic records from all possible sources. Later VAN GOMPEL (1991;1996) added a few historic records, and reported on strandings and sightings from 1975 to 1994. Nowadays, all coastal communities and the public are well informed about whom to contact in case of strandings. MUMM is keeping a database of strandings, bycatches and sightings of cetaceans in Belgium. Part of the data from 2001 onwards can be consulted online at MUMM's website (<http://www.mumm.ac.be>).

This document was prepared as an information document for the 12<sup>th</sup> Advisory Committee of ASCOBANS, after an invitation, formulated at the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Advisory Committee (ASCOBANS, 2004), to submit information about the (historic) occurrence of the bottlenose dolphin in the waters under the jurisdiction of Parties to ASCOBANS.

## Strandings, catches and sightings in Belgian waters

### *Strandings and catches*

Records of strandings of bottlenose dolphins in Belgium are rare. Data before 1975 can be considered anecdotal. The records of strandings and catches at the coastline and in the Belgian part of the river Scheldt that figure in MUMM's database are given in table 1 (data from DE SMET, 1974;1981; VAN GOMPEL, 1991;1996). The weight is given as was reported. For the cases in 1966 (November) and 1990 no further information is available. The other strandings and catches are documented in more detail; in most cases even skeletal remains exist at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (remains of one of the animals are kept at the RUCA, Antwerp). The locations of the strandings and catches are given in figure 2. The animals of 1934 and 1960 (see picture 1) ventured further upstream than indicated (respectively up to approximately 106 km and 139 km upstream from the mouth of the Scheldt).

**Table 1:** Data of strandings and catches of bottlenose dolphins in Belgian waters (database MUMM – different publications).

Year	Month	Details	Male Female	Length	Weight (as reported)
1803	Apr	Stranding coast		Adult	
1874	Dec	Catch coast (beach)	male	2.75m	
1934	Jun	Shot (River Scheldt, 106km upstream)	female	3.25m	360kg
1935	Dec	Catch coast (beach)	male	3.1m	
1937	Sep	Stranding coast	female	3m	

1960	Nov	Shot (River Scheldt, 139 km upstream)	male (?)	2.9m	495kg
1963	Jun	Stranding coast	male	3m	500kg
1963	Aug	Stranding coast	male		
1966	May	Stranding coast (live)		2.2m	
1966	Nov	Stranding coast - no further information			
1971	May	Stranding coast	male	3.27m	
1977	Jun	Stranding coast	female	3.18m	
1978	May	Stranding coast	female	2.96m	300kg
1979	Dec	Stranding coast	female	2.58m	
1990	Sep	Stranding coast – no further information		2.3m	

There is no clear seasonal distribution for these 15 strandings or catches. None occurred in January, February, March, July and October. Three strandings occurred in the months May, June and December.

### *Sightings*

Sightings were hardly ever reported in the past, due to several obvious reasons. Below, the only confirmed sightings of bottlenose dolphins in Belgian waters that figure in MUMM's database are given. In figure 2 the locations of sightings are indicated on a map. The animal of 1995 ventured further upstream than indicated on the map.

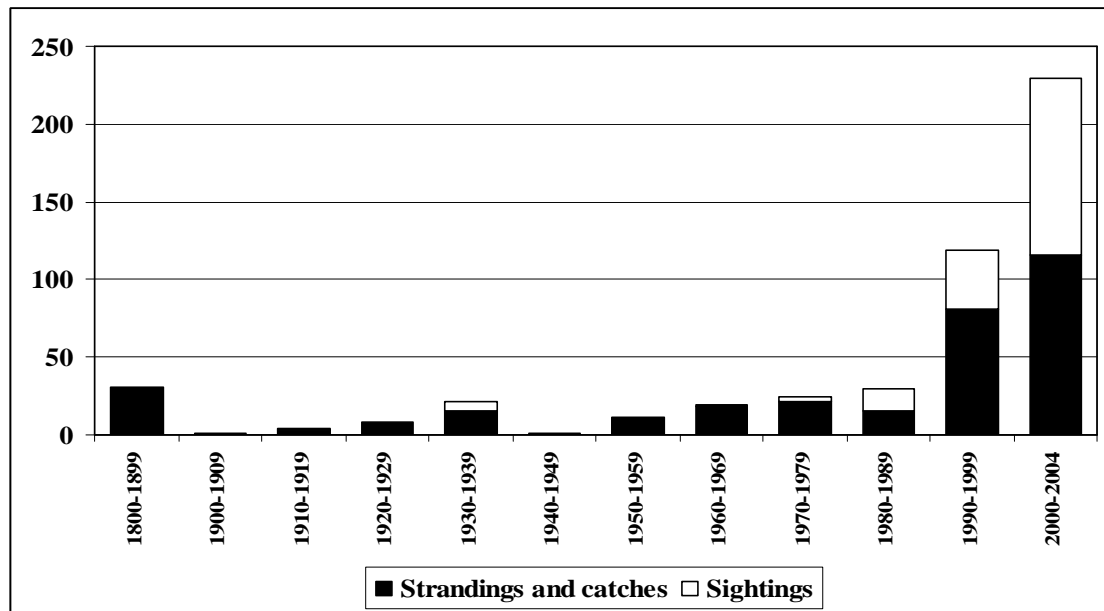
- 1995 From 27 May to 3 June a solitary bottlenose dolphin was observed in the river Scheldt, up to 112 km upstream (additional observations of this animal between 15 April and 11 June 1995 in the Dutch part of the river Scheldt - data K.Camphuysen).
- 2002 On 3 December 2002 an adult male bottlenose dolphin entered the harbour of Blankenberge. This concerned 'Dony' the Wandering Dolphin, also known under the names Georges, Leo and Randy (see <http://www.Irishdolphins.com>). After its visit to Blankenberge, it swam up the River Scheldt to the port of Antwerp (75 km upstream), where it hung around from 6 to 11 December. Eventually the animal reached the sea again, by swimming through The Netherlands (inland waters). It was again observed in the port of Zeebrugge between 24 and 28 December 2002.
- 2004 On 4 September a group of around 30 bottlenose dolphins was seen in the vicinity of the Oostdyck sandbank. The day before, probably the same group was observed near the Ruytingen Bank (France). In the same period large groups of bottlenose dolphins were observed in The Netherlands (12 August and 9 September 2004; data K.Camphuysen).
- 2004 On 30 October, 8 bottlenose dolphins were observed on the Kwintebank (Anne Versteede – sighting reported through the Institute of Nature Conservation).
- 2004 On 1 November, 5 bottlenose dolphins were observed at around 1km from the western harbour wall of Zeebrugge (Marc van de Walle, Institute of Nature Conservation).

### **Discussion**

According to several authors (in DE SMET, 1974) the bottlenose dolphin was not known from the Belgian coast in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (although one stranding record exists). Later, it was considered, together with the harbour porpoise, as the only indigenous cetacean species.

An indication for the feeble attention that was paid to stranded cetaceans in Belgium in the past can be found in figure 1. In this figure the number of records of cetacean sightings, strandings and catches

available in the database kept by MUMM is given. In general it can be stated that the older the data are, the more anecdotal and incomplete the information gets. There is no doubt that prior to the 1970s or even the 1980s many strandings of relatively small species were not recorded. As an example we can mention the strandings of bottlenose dolphins in 1963, 1963, 1966 (May) and 1971. These all occurred at the same coastal community (Wenduine), where at that time more attention was paid to stranded cetaceans (by one person) than in most other communities (after DE SMET, 1974;1981). Since 1979 only 1 stranding of a bottlenose dolphin was reported (a decomposed carcass with no further information) in Belgium.



**Figure 1:** An indication of the number of records of sightings, strandings and catches of all cetaceans in Belgium between 1800 and 2004 currently figuring in the database kept by MUMM (most records prior to 1995 from publications). Especially from the years 1990 onwards, a remarkable increase in sightings and strandings is obvious. The reason for the larger number of reported sightings is the start of seabirds at sea surveys by the Institute of Nature Conservation, a better reporting of sightings, and an increase in the abundance of harbour porpoise and probably also white-beaked dolphin in Belgian waters. The increase in the number of strandings is due to an increased number of strandings and bycatches of harbour porpoises since 1998.

A lot more records of the bottlenose dolphin exist for The Netherlands, where strandings of cetaceans were systematically recorded from a much earlier date. In 1960 for instance, already 279 cases were reported, and during some years more than 10 specimens washed ashore (VAN DEINSE, 1960).

We can conclude, given the combination of the number of records, the generally limited attention that was paid to stranded marine mammals in the past, and the anecdotal nature of reported strandings, that bottlenose dolphins occurred off the Belgian coast at least in the 1930s and the 1960s-1970s. Currently there is no resident population of this species in Belgian waters.

Since the population in the southern North Sea disappeared, the few animals observed in Belgian waters probably concern vagrants from populations in the Channel area and/or the Atlantic. The observations in the southern North Sea in 2004, amongst which the observation of a large group of this species, is exceptional. Due to the fact that populations of this species still exist in the Channel area and the northern North Sea and that sightings have occurred during the last years, it cannot be ruled out that this species will, some day, re-establish a population in the southern North Sea. The increase in the stocks of clupeid fish, an improving water quality and the legal protection are beneficial factors.

## Acknowledgements

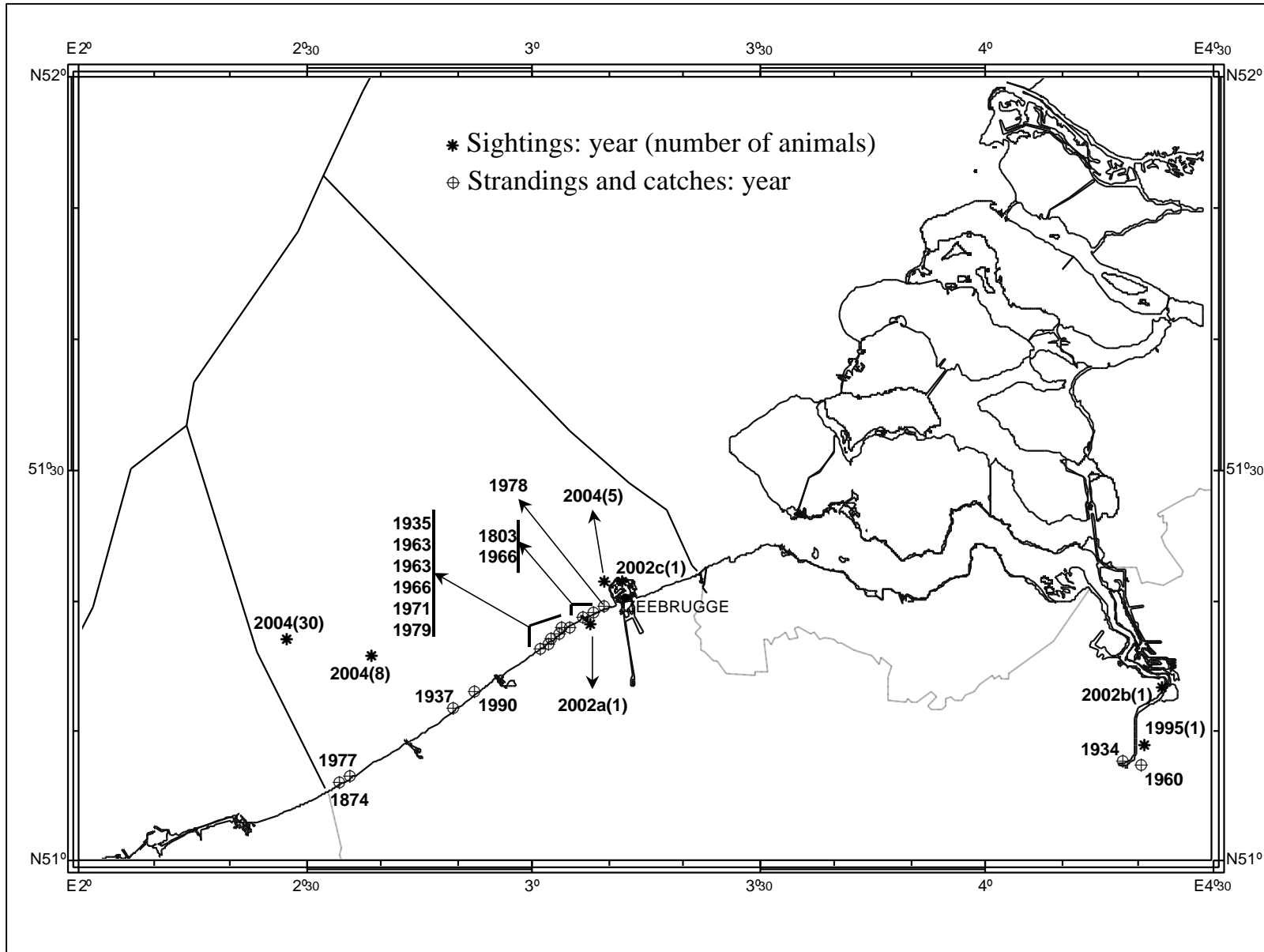
We wish to thank Jan Tavernier for providing the photograph, Joan Backers for his assistance in creating the map, and the Institute of Nature Conservation for providing additional sighting data.

## Literature

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*Picture 1: Bottlenose dolphin shot in the river Scheldt near Wetteren, approximately 139km upstream, in 1960.*



**Figure 2:** Indicative location of strandings, catches and sightings of bottlenose dolphins in Belgian waters between 1800 and 2004, as figuring in the database managed by MUMM/RBINS; 2002a, 2002b and 2002c concern sightings of the same animal