



5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> April 2014

## *Workshop Abstracts*

Bonizzoni S., Bearzi G., Würsig B. 2014. Shifting perceptions towards Mediterranean whales and dolphins: from monsters to icons. Workshop "Marine Mammals as Indicators of Historical Changes", 28th Annual Conference of the European Cetacean Society. Liege, Belgium, 5–9 April 2014.

# **Shifting perceptions towards Mediterranean whales and dolphins: from monsters to icons**

Silvia Bonizzoni<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Giovanni Bearzi<sup>1,2,3</sup> and Bernd Würsig<sup>3</sup>

1) Dolphin Biology and Conservation, 2) OceanCare, 3) Texas A&M University at Galveston

Middle age to modern Mediterranean iconography and literature often portray cetaceans as monsters deserving extermination. Based on evidence dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, whales approaching the coast or live-stranded were regularly killed, often savagely, while dolphins were regarded as vermin to be culled or – in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century – as game trophies. Conversely, in the last 30 years whales and dolphins have become charismatic animals and they have become protected by the laws of Mediterranean nations. Shifts of public perceptions in parts of the region were investigated by means of literature reviews, assessments of public reactions to cetacean mortality events, and interviews of fishers. In 2009, as a mortality event involving seven sperm whales occurred in the Adriatic Sea, 118 bystanders were interviewed at the stranding site. In the proximity of decomposing or dismembered whale carcasses, almost 70% of the respondents expressed feelings of compassion and care for the animals, whereas only 4% reported non-compassionate attitudes. Additionally, between 2011 and 2013 we interviewed 246 artisanal fishers using bottom-set nets in Italy and Greece. Most fishers (88%) considered dolphins as vermin and reported gear depredation, with mean perceived losses ranging between €2,000 and 8,000 annually, depending on the area. However, few fishers (3–16%) listed dolphin killing as a possible solution. Furthermore, 60–80% of the fishers claimed dolphins to be "as intelligent as humans" or "more intelligent than humans". This evidence contributes to highlighting attitude shifts having occurred over the past decades, with a striking change of perceptions since the 1970s. This recent increased positive public perception and even awe of whales and dolphins can be coupled with ever-better knowledge of why populations are declining due to anthropogenic effects—including habitat degradation and wholesale decimation of food sources by factory fishing—hopefully resulting in better and more vigilant regulations to protect these animals.