

Assessment of Acoustic Adaptations for Noise Compensation in Marine Mammals

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LONG-TERM GOALS

The proposed research will address the fundamental theoretical issue of noise compensation mechanisms in the vocal communication of marine mammals. Noise compensation mechanisms are important for improving signal transmission with an energy limited source. A better understanding of marine mammal noise compensation mechanisms can potentially provide effective means of improving signal transmission in a noisy marine environment and for assessing the impact of man-made sounds on the use of sound by marine mammals.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this project are to: 1) generate testable hypotheses of general vocal responses of marine mammals to particular noise types; and 2) test these hypotheses with data from two low-frequency baleen whale species in coastal shallow water environments using existing data from North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) acoustic tag recordings (Digital Archival Tag - Dtag) (Johnson and Tyack 2003) and new acoustic Dtag data collected from Southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*).

APPROACH

The approach for this study is to first develop hypotheses about common mechanisms of noise compensation in marine mammals by investigating the matching of marine mammal signals to their acoustic habitats and general trends for noise compensation documented from different species of animals in response to noise sources in the environment. These hypotheses will then be tested using an extensive existing database of acoustic tag data collected from the North Atlantic right whale in the Bay of Fundy to determine what, if any, vocal compensation mechanisms were employed by North Atlantic right whales. The second stage of this study will involve collecting additional data from Southern right whales. Commercial shipping activity is significantly lower in the Southern hemisphere, providing the opportunity to compare the vocal behavior of a single species of right whale in areas with very low human activity to areas with active commercial ports in the same region. The primary proposed location to study the Southern right whale population is in Argentina, in two adjacent gulfs, Golfo San José and Golfo Nuevo. Both gulfs experience similar weather conditions

and are used by a single population of Southern right whales but differ in the level of human activity. Golfo San José has extremely low levels of human activity as it is an established marine sanctuary for the whales and therefore is expected to have a close to 'natural' ambient noise structure. Golfo Nuevo in contrast has a commercial port (Puerto Madryn) on its western shore, with frequent transits of large container and transport vessels in and out of the gulf. Puerto Pirámides, a town on the northeastern shore has companies that run whale watch trips during all daylight hours from June to December with smaller outboard engine vessels. Data collection is planned in both gulfs to compare the vocal behavior of individual whales in very low and moderate noise conditions. Vessel noise will be documented by continuous acoustic recorders in both gulfs to quantify the levels of acoustic disturbance presented to the whales and any detectable changes in the calling behavior of the whales. These data will then be used to further test the general noise compensation hypotheses developed in the first part of the study and compare the vocal behavior between the two right whale species.

WORK COMPLETED

A literature review of existing vocal noise compensation mechanisms has been completed and a review manuscript is in preparation with submission planned before the end of 2010. Copies of the existing Dtag data from North Atlantic right whales were obtained and vocalizations from the tagged whales have been extracted. Measurements of call parameters (include duration, frequency content, and receive level) and noise levels have been completed and the resulting article was published online in the journal *Biology Letters* in July 2010. These results were presented at the Society of Marine Mammalogy conference in Quebec, Canada in October 2009, the Acoustical Society of America meeting in Baltimore, MD in April 2010, and at the 2nd International Conference on the Effects of Noise on Aquatic Life in Cork, Ireland in August 2010. A second publication resulting from the extended abstract for the talk at the Ireland meeting is currently in press. Applications for permits for acoustic data collection in Argentina have been submitted by the Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas, the Argentine counterpart for this portion of the project. Government agencies that issue research permits in Argentina are the Dirección de Fauna y Flora Silvestres and Dirección General de Conservación de Áreas Protegidas from Chubut.

RESULTS

An acoustic recording tag, the Dtag, was used to record the noise levels received by individual whales and the vocalizations they produced in the Bay of Fundy, Canada. These data were used to assess the variability in the received levels (and therefore source level), duration and frequency content of calls produced by the tagged whale in varying ambient noise environments. Results from the analysis of the 2001-2005 Dtag data from the Bay of Fundy indicate that individual call production is modified in increased ambient noise conditions with changes to call intensity. Individual whales producing multiple calls showed increases in received call amplitude in increasing ambient noise conditions (Figure 1). These results are consistent with previous studies that have shown similar vocal modifications in odontocetes (Scheifele et al. 2005; Holt et al. 2009).

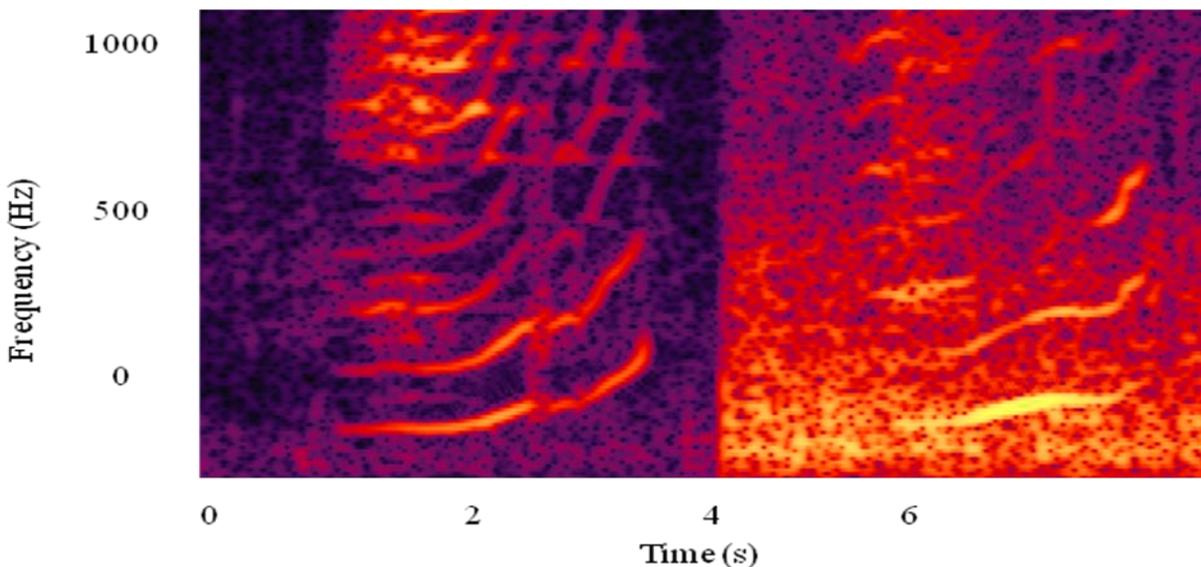


Figure 1. Spectrograms of two upcalls from a single North Atlantic right whale illustrating increased call intensity in the higher noise recording.

IMPACT/APPLICATIONS

This study will lead to a better understanding of the existence of acoustic adaptations in right whale vocalizations and the types of vocal compensation mechanisms that they employ for coping with increased ambient noise conditions, including both natural and man-made sound sources. This project is a first step in developing a general theory regarding noise compensation mechanisms in marine mammal species.

RELATED PROJECTS

None

REFERENCES

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PUBLICATIONS

Parks SE, Johnson, M, Nowacek, D, Tyack, PL (2010) Individual right whale call louder in increased environmental noise. *Biology Letters*. Published online July 7, 2010 doi: 10.1098/rsbl.2010.0451