



EXPEDITION DIARY Azores 2005

By David Moore

7 March

Here's the first diary entry from David, your expedition leader, for the 2005 Azores Whale and Dolphin surveying expedition.

I'm here at Biosphere headquarters in Suffolk, getting together some of the equipment and sorting out some of the final details before leaving for Faial early on Saturday.

We've just spoken to Chris, chief skipper, on the phone – he tells us the weather forecast is good and the boat is ready for us all!

For the first slot, I'm looking forward to meeting you all off Monday's plane from Lisbon (if not, in Pete's café at 13:30). For all of you joining us in the later slots, I'll keep you updated of our progress in this diary...

13 March

After the arrival of the first slot of team members on Monday, we managed to fit in most of the training on Monday to profit from the predicted good weather today and yesterday.

Tuesday got off to a good start with a number of sightings of common dolphin and a Risso's dolphin encounter as we sailed down the coast of Faial to follow-up on some cetacean sightings given to us by the lookouts towards the northern end of the island. They proved right and after a bit of searching in what were quite choppy seas we encountered some Sei whales who we were able to track by following their 'footprints'.

We've just come back now from a full day at sea today, having sailed right down to the far end of Pico to spend a couple of hours with a group of sperm whales travelling about a mile and a half off the coast where they follow the 500-1000m contour line to feed on the squid there. Though travelling away from us, the sightings from the lookouts and soundings from the hydrophone meant we were able to catch up with them and in fact totalled 12 encounters. This meant quite a bit of manoeuvring for Chris in order to position the boat behind the diving animals in order to not disturb them and to be in a good position for the whale fluke ID photos. We're just about to download the pictures and see which are best for inclusion on the database. Along with these we had a few sighting of the shy striped dolphins jumping out of the water ahead of us.

With a couple of full sea days and both Jo and Cathy's birthdays to celebrate in these first couple of days we've had to postpone Lisa's whale and dolphin ID presentation till tomorrow night. At least by then we'll have plenty of first hand experience of these mammals in the wild...

17 March

We headed south of Pico again on Thursday and before long caught up with a large group of sperm whales socializing on the surface - about 16 of them with just a couple of males, they were spending their time lobtailing (hitting the surface of the water with their tails) and sidefluking but not diving down. Moving on, we were lucky enough to encounter a blue whale (about 30 metres long) who gave us good photo opportunities with Mt. Pico behind. Later in the day the hydrophone led us to a couple more male sperm whales - when the second of these dived Delwyn and Sue jumped in to attempt to collect skin samples. Though they saw the skin floating around in the water, they didn't manage to secure any samples. It's harder than you think!

Friday brought more sperm whale encounters in the same area along with groups of bottlenose and Risso's dolphins and more skin collection attempts.

With perfect flat, sunny conditions the POPA team made concerted observation efforts during 'turtle time' to try to find one, but no luck so far. We did come across a hammerhead shark, however, and then a fin whale was added to our species list. It also proved a good day for recording codas (noises the whales make when chatting to each other) - Oliver fixed up some software for downloading and listening to these when back at the apartments.

Yesterday the weather was much rougher though the hydrophone quickly picked up sperm whales on the other side of Pico which the lookouts had not seen. They were clearly not put off by the bouncy conditions as one of them breached in the air several times. To escape the bouncy conditions we then headed down to the corner of Faial and spent time close to a group of Risso's (the same group as yesterday, Lisa thinks).

After a full first week at sea, we're on shore today recharging our batteries. After coffee at Pete's this morning, half of the team is off with Terry Taxi on a tour round the island while others are getting to grips with the Europhlukes programme or playing pool upstairs!

22 April

Monday was another good day at sea when we cruised down the coast of Faial as far as the lighthouse by the new land created from the volcanic explosion a few decades ago. On route we saw bottlenose and common dolphin as well as a star fish before eventually tracking down a Sei whale.

With a front moving in, Tuesday and Wednesday were then shore days where everybody had the chance to extract fins of the bottlenose, Risso's dolphins and fin whales and see how the Europhlukes programme works. Chris also had a band of willing helpers doing jobs down in the marina on the boat and developing a new in-water boat-washing method.

Yesterday we were out again, though were limited to the channel in between Faial and Pico to avoid the stronger waters. This morning has been the same, with a friendly group of about 15 to 20 Bottlenose dolphin bow-riding and diving under the boat. Having just had lunch at Pete's café we're about to go out again for the afternoon. With calmer waters we should be able to get further out, hopefully to find some goodbye cetaceans for slot one before the new team members arrive for the predicted good weather on Monday.

27 April

With the arrival on Monday of slot two, we did not allow them any time on shore, but rather held off with the introductory talks and training in order to head out immediately on the boat to profit from the remaining relatively calm seas.

This proved to be a good plan: Monday was a reasonable start as we were able to cruise down the coast of Faial and spend some time with a group of friendly bottlenose dolphins. Tuesday was then a grand day as after some on-boat training we were able to follow some of the whale watching boats a few miles out to where the lookouts had reported blows from a baleen whale.

These turned out to be three blue whales, possibly two adults and a juvenile, our second sighting of this species this year and so far they do not seem to be animals that have been photo IDed previously. In addition we had numerous common and Risso's dolphin encounters (we have just discovered whilst sorting out the photos that some of these are the ones that were spotted during the last slot).

With the arrival of the front that Chris had been expecting from his forecasts, today has been a shore day, so everybody has been busy getting to grips with the fluke extractions, sorting out the best photo ID for each animal to be entered in to the database and helping Chris out with some jobs down on the boat.

3 May

Everybody profited from the shore days over the weekend to make headway with fluke extractions, help out Chris with some painting on the boat and also have the chance to take a tour around the island and walk down from the top of the caldera.

The last couple of days have been much calmer so we've had full sea days, both with sperm whales. Yesterday we encountered a total of fourteen of them, which we were able to follow for some distance against the waves along the coast of Faial. Of these fourteen individuals, however, we were only able to get one fluke ID (a very well-worn tail, though not one which has been previously spotted). This poor record was partly due to their flukes disappearing behind the waves, but also because it seems that they were concentrating on travelling down the coast (probably to meet up with another group heading down to the same end of the island and spotted by the lookouts on the other side). Nevertheless we did have one individual pop up twenty metres in front of the boat and another who breached a couple of times for us, so we can't complain too much!

Today was similar with a large number of sperm whales but very few ID opportunities. We did, however, have our first humpback encounter of the season - having been right down to the southern corner of Faial, we eventually tracked him down out from the channel in between the two islands. In addition there were numerous common, bottlenose and Risso's dolphin encounters. A busy day and lots of work for Rachel who is now writing up all the encounters!

With six different cetacean species under slot 2's belt, they are getting very demanding for a turtle. Not sure where they are this year...

8 May

Following slot 2's departure yesterday (and heartless abandonment by Debbie, slot 1 research assistant), I'm having my morning coffee at the Sunday bakers and thought I would take a few moments to fill you in on the last few days before I rush back up to the apartments in frenzied preparation for the arrival of our all-girl dream team tomorrow morning.

Despite slot 2's excellent turtle time observation efforts, it was clearly just not meant to be (although the on shore look-out apparently spotted a couple while we were busy with whales). So it's up to slot 3 to prove the existence of this particular species for our 2005 expedition. We did, however, have more luck with dolphins and humpback whales. Wednesday was a good dolphin day and after a shore day on the Thursday, we had another full day out on the Friday with numerous dolphin encounters and a humpback along the coast of Faial. We stayed with her for an hour or so, measuring her dive times and trying to get a good ID shot against the waves.

Lisa and Marijke are over on Pico today, visiting Dutch Risso researchers based over there, and Torsten from slot 2 is out scuba-diving with one of the local dive companies. Chris tells us that the weather is looking promising for a run of sea days next week, so I'll keep you abreast of developments.

14 May

This last week has seen an increase in turtle action as well a large number of sperm whales.

Whilst our first sea day on Tuesday brought only a pair of common dolphin, Wednesday was a more active day: our first turtle was spotted but dived down under the boat. In between numerous common dolphin encounters, we were with a couple of male sperm whales (one of which surprisingly breached directly in front of the boat).

Our first turtles came on board on Thursday morning. The first one was pretty large and we thought we'd have a hard task getting him in to the boat, but fortunately he was pretty docile. We followed the usual tagging, measuring and crab checking procedures and had him back in the water in a few minutes. The second one came along about an hour later - smaller and easier to get on board. The rest of the day was spent quite far out at the other end of Pico with a large group of sperm whales and their young who were being very accommodating in offering their whale flukes for photo ID.

With so many other dolphin encounters including bottlenose and Risso's dolphins to waylay us on our return, we didn't get back to Horta till 6 o'clock.

Yesterday was another big sperm whale day with quite a scattered group of eighteen socializing animals. We also came across a turtle on the surface, but decided to leave him in peace as he was busy munching on a Portuguese man'o'war. Conditions were also good for trying out the new skin sample net which we place in over the back of the boat behind diving sperm whales. It seems to work quite well as a collection method, though we didn't manage to secure any samples.

Last night we burned off our remaining energies at Pete's café sport and in the local 'Crazy and Company' discotheque (a one-off experience), as today is a shore day. Now everyone is either over on Pico, driving around the island or upstairs in 2B!

18 May

We spent Sunday on shore, progressing with the computer work and trying to track down the happenings of the local Espirito Santo festival.

Monday was then another full sea day when we headed down to the south coast of Pico (as has often been the case this year), past the common and bottlenose dolphins to a large group of socializing sperm whales. Not bad – with a group of about 20 individuals, we obtained about 13 fluke IDs and had some rather curious animals coming close to the boat and popping their heads out of the water. We also had this slot's first encounter with striped dolphins.

Yesterday morning we cruised down the side of Faial to keep in shelter from the winds and had some bracing roller-coaster waves for our return back to harbour. We came across a couple of common dolphin groups but decided on the shore option for the afternoon. We had quite a productive time matching as we discovered that Monday's curious sperm whale with a hole in his fluke had also been spotted by Lisa several times during July and August 2004: since then he's developed a couple more scallops and a nick along his fluke, but still retains his distinctive shape and hole.

Pete from the café is having his eightieth birthday party this evening. Then with excitement mounting for the Eurovision Song Contest qualifying rounds tomorrow evening followed by our last supper on Friday evening (coupled with good forecasts for the last two days), we're set for a gun-shot end to the 2005 expedition. Having being spoilt by the turtles and an excess of sperm whales, slot 3 have placed their order with the baleen whales.

20 May

Hi to everyone involved in the 2005 Azores Whale and Dolphin surveying expedition. It's late in the evening on our last day here in Horta, and for once I was not the last to leave Pete's café sport – most of the team are still down there, perched on the harbourside soaking up the atmosphere, but I thought I would take the opportunity to send you a last diary entry before everyone hops on the plane tomorrow.

We had a great last day out today – reports from the look-outs took us up the coast of Faial and before long and with a little help from the hydrophone, we had tracked down our faithful friends, the sperm whales.

First of all spotted the solitary males, then a large group of females (the same group as last time) before coming across the males again on our return in to harbour. A contrast to yesterday where there was nothing much to report apart from a couple of dolphin encounters. By mid-afternoon we decided to stop off at Madalena on Pico and half of the team jumped off and caught the later ferry back across the channel, arriving just in time for the BBQ.

Slot 3 have certainly been strong on their sperm whales – 65 encounters in total and a total of 98 animals! Not so many baleen whales – one theory is that the northern winds have pushed the krill further out meaning the baleen whales have not been coming in so close. And at least slot three has provided proof that the turtles really are out there – honestly!

We've certainly achieved lots of useful research and had lots of fun here at basecamp this year, so thanks to everyone who has participated and contributed to making the expedition a success. Chris and Lisa now have a break before they continue with their regular research in June. Hope you're all enjoying your time post-Azores!

David Moore