

Project Update: April 2007

Greetings from southern Chile! It has been far the most exciting and amazing season we have had so far. During the last year we have working towards the design of a marine protected area in southern Chile, the biggest marine park in South America. By working at different spatial scales, and through our NGO (Centro Ballena Azul) running both the Kepenklu project (small cetaceans) and the Blue Whale Project (whales), we are focusing on the ecology of marine mammals, which we also use as flagship and umbrella species to recommend conservation policies, environmental education and area zoning.

Our specific project on dolphins, the Kepenklu Project, has been running with great success.

Key project achievements include the identification of important areas for dolphins, which are used mainly for feeding and social activities. Interestingly, the habitat segregation we had observed in other areas between the two main species we have been working with (Chilean and Peale's dolphins) is not a common pattern for the rest of the distribution in southern Chile. As we have already found in this area, Guaitecas Archipelago, both species share similar habitats and even niches. More remarkable, both species were observed, in several occasions, coordinating in feeding and even in social interactions. For the first time, a hybrid of Chilean and Peale's dolphin has been recorded. Great part of our focus has been given to the way dolphins use their selected areas, and by measuring behaviour we have detected that the dolphins select small and localized areas mostly to find food and socialize.

Our study area, compared to other areas in Chile where we have worked with marine mammals, seems to be a hotspot in cetacean diversity. Chilean and Peale's dolphins are not the only species found, although they seem to be the more common ones, but rather they are part of a rich diversity. During our marine surveys we have found orcas, Burmeister's porpoises, bottlenose dolphins, humpback whales and even blue whales.

Marine conservation threats identified include salmon farming, intense boat traffic and garbage. In order to create environmental awareness, we have been developing workshops and talks in the local community. We have worked specifically with children of two communities, developing workshops on garbage issues and marine life and conservation.

The information generated up to now will be used for the planning and design of a marine protected area in the region. Meetings and workshops will continue with Chilean authorities in order to move forward in the process of establishing the marine protected area.