Humpback Whale Research: American Samoa

Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies, the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary (NMS), the Fagatele Bay NMS and the AS Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources.

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Background: American Samoa is an important breeding area for South Pacific humpback whales in Oceania. This population was severely depleted by commercial whaling, and their recovery status is uncertain.

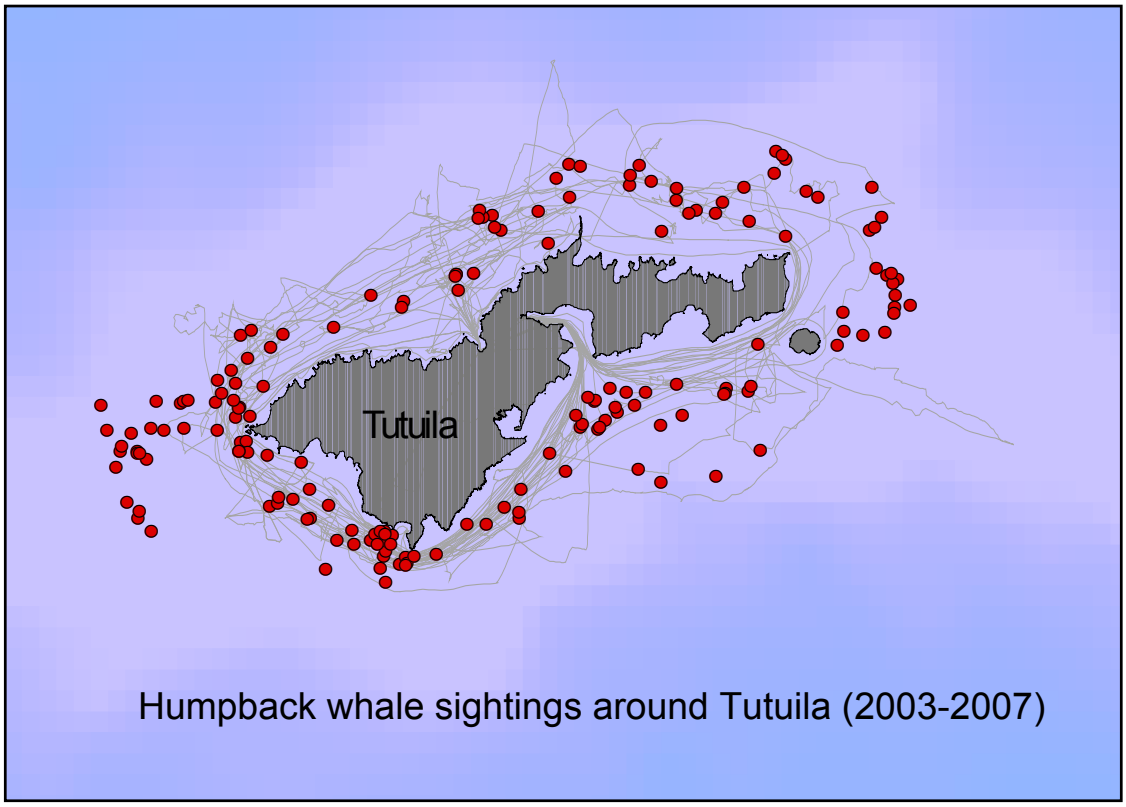
Research goals: Using vessel surveys, photo-identification, biopsy sampling and song recordings, the project intends to define and assess the local population, to clarify its relationship to other parts of Oceania and to identify its Antarctic migratory destinations.

Rationale: This is the only population of humpback whales in the Southern Hemisphere for which the U.S. is directly responsible. Its current status and vulnerability to human activities (like the recently proposed whaling) is unknown.

Collaborators: The US National Park Service, the US National Marine Fisheries Service, the Samoan Division of Environment and Conservation, the Antarctic Humpback Whale Catalog, and scientists from more than seven countries in the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium.

Accomplishments to date:

- Over 200 humpback whales catalogued, 2003-2007.
- Detailed data on habitat use and behavior at Tutuila, American Samoa, documenting its importance as a breeding habitat.
- High rates of exchange with Samoa and confirmed matches to Tonga, French Polynesia and the Cook Islands.
- Comparing photo-identification images to the Antarctic Humpback Whale Catalog because determining where Samoan whales feed has important management implications, including for the scientific whaling proposed by Japan.
- Collaborations in ocean-scale studies of humpback whale molecular genetics and acoustics.
- Significant contributions to the understanding of resident dolphin species.
- Research training for on-site partners and collaborators.
- Findings communicated in over a dozen reports to international scientific venues.



Humpback whale sightings around Tutuila (2003-2007)




Using Fluke (tail) ID photographs, the project has revealed movement to W. Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands and French Polynesia. Antarctic feeding grounds are not yet clearly defined.