

Wishlist funding: interim report to Cargill

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Introduction

This brief report is to update the Cargill team on progress with the work conducted by the Mauritania small pelagic FIP under the 'wishlist' funding from Cargill, received in March 2025 with grateful thanks and appreciation from the FIP team. Some of the activities are still ongoing, and a further report will be provided when everything is complete.

Activity 1: Atlantic humpback dolphin

Compilation and review of existing information on the dolphin in Mauritania

A report by Abdellahi Samba Bilal and Cheikh-Baye Braham (IMROP) summarises the available written information on occurrences of the Atlantic humpback dolphin in Mauritania. It is clear from this report that work is needed to update our knowledge on the current existence, distribution and population of this species. As a brief summary:

- The species is known to occur in Mauritania in the Banc d'Arguin (PNBA – Parc National du Banc d'Arguin; a protected area since 1976 where only traditional sail-powered fishing by the resident Imraguen people is permitted).
- The most recent population census in the PNBA dates from 1995, and estimated at that time a stable population of roughly 100 individuals. This population is isolated from other West African populations, making its conservation both more difficult and more important.
- In the 1990s, it seems that the dolphin was distributed throughout the PNBA, but with its main habitat area being in the north, around Agadir¹.
- In terms of strandings, report up to 1998 report them as fairly frequent (~20 observed in 5 years in the 1970s, ~15 observed during a project in the 1990s). Since 1998, however, only one has been reported, by the IMROP team in the PNBA, in 2013.
- There is no recent information available on accidental bycatch of humpback dolphins by fishermen, either inside or outside the PNBA. In the past, the Imraguen would take for food dolphins caught accidentally, or stranded.

Survey of fishing communities along the coast

The next step was therefore to conduct a survey of fishing communities, with a particular focus on the area in and around the PNBA. The purpose of this was to establish i) whether the humpback dolphin still exists in this area, and if so ii) to find out what we can about its distribution, population and interaction with fisheries. The survey was conducted by Abdellahi Samba Bilal and Sal Amadou, with the support of the IMROP teams on the ground and village chiefs. They also took the opportunity to identify cetacean identification guides.

The particular targets of the survey were the captains of the 'lanches' (sailing vessels) in the PNBA, and artisanal fishing captains from the area immediately south of the park (the district of Mheijrat), because the historical information suggested that these were the areas where the dolphin was most likely to be observed. The area covered by the survey is shown in the map below.

¹ Not that Agadir

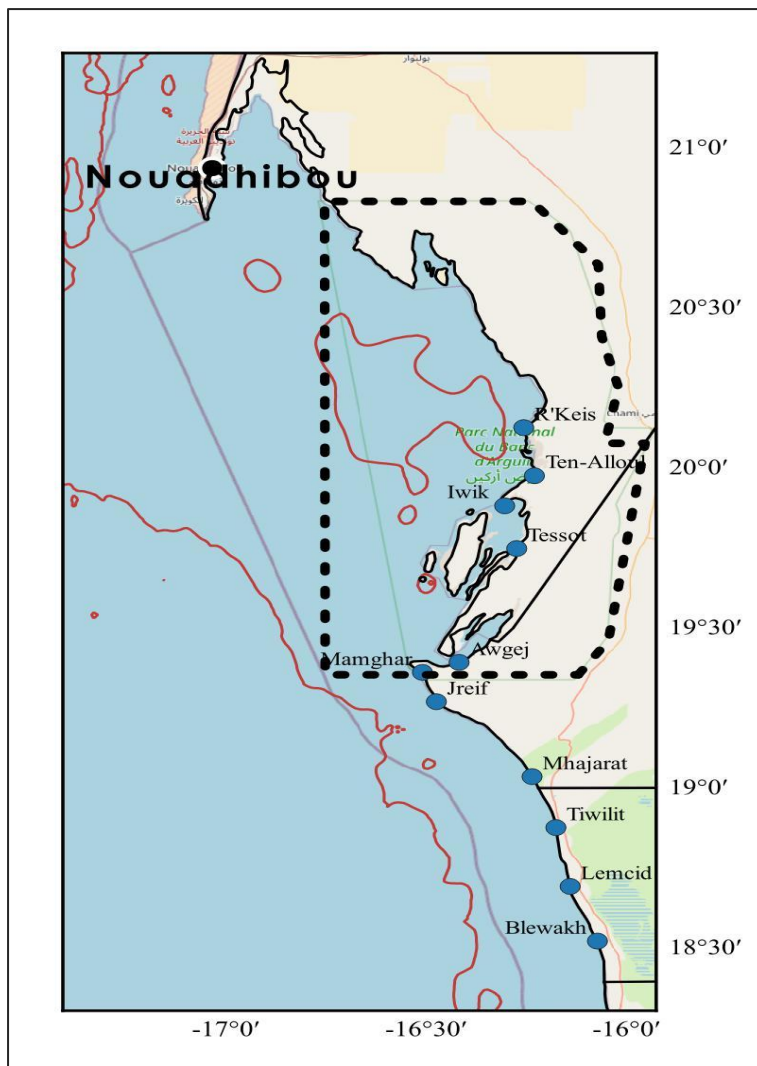


Figure 1. Area of the Atlantic humpback dolphin fisherman survey, conducted by IMROP in July 2025 (Samba Bilal and Amadou 2025). PNBA inside the dotted line, villages in blue. The survey covered the park and extended to the district of Mheijrat (Mhajarat) directly south of the park.

The results of this survey were very encouraging. 85% of those surveyed recognised the humpback dolphin, and distinguished it from the two other species of cetacean that they see regularly, i.e. the bottlenose dolphin and the orca. (In Hassaniya, the local language, they have different names: aoudeun=humpback dolphin, ajane=bottlenose dolphin, sanke=orca.) Most of those recognising the humpback dolphin had seen at least one individual during 2025, with the most recent observation dating from 2 July (just a few days before the survey).

There was not agreement as to whether sightings of the dolphin had increased or decreased over time, with the majority saying that they did not know. Nearly all, however, considered it to be rare. Two veteran captains from different villages both noted a particular area (channels offshore from Arkeiss) where the dolphin used to be very abundant, such that the area was known as the 'ajare aoudeun' (humpback channels) – but it is now rare in this area. The likelihood, therefore, is that it has declined. Nevertheless, it seems that the dolphin can be spotted throughout the park and as far south as Mheijrat.

A minority of the captains (~20%) stated that they had accidentally captured this species in the past, compared to a majority (~80%) who have caught bottlenose dolphins. All this reported humpback dolphin bycatch was with fixed net type gears, mainly (nearly 90%) the 'filet courbine', and mainly in the south (Mamghar to Mheijrat). The captains noted that the humpback dolphin is shy and likely to stay away from pirogues, as opposed to the bottlenose dolphin which is confident and often approaches their vessels.

Dolphin poster

The dolphin poster has been produced in three languages (Arabic, French and English) and will be displayed at landing sites and PNBA and IMROP offices throughout the relevant area. Crucially, Abdellahi Samba has provided his own phone numbers and email address to allow sightings to be easily reported. The posters are attached in Annex to this report (as separate documents).

Video and app

These elements of the project are still in the planning / discussion stage.

Next steps for the Atlantic humpback dolphin

As regards the small pelagic FIP, the evidence (dolphin survey, observers on board purse seine vessels) suggests that the small pelagic fishery does not interact with these dolphins. Therefore strictly from the FIP perspective, the work can be considered complete.

However, from the point of view of the dolphin (bearing in mind the species is considered to be critically endangered) it seems the right thing to do to continue to support the conservation of this population, if this can be done with external resources (i.e. without detracting from the core work of the FIP). The FIP team is thinking this over at present.

Activity 2: Observer training

The 3-day observer training workshop was held in April 2025 at IMROP (2 days presentations and discussions, one day laboratory-based practical). It covered the following (report by Braham and Bouzouma, April 2025):

- Objectives of the observer programme, what their data are used for
- Detailed presentation and discussion of the observer manual, including sampling strategies for all relevant types of vessels and gear, the various datasheets and how to complete them, how to estimate catch size and how to sub-sample, the importance of following correct procedures to ensure comparable data
- Detailed sampling strategies for each fishery
- What to do in circumstances such as rough seas, linguistic and communication difficulties with the captain and crew, breakdown of equipment or the vessel, transhipments, lack of appropriate working space; discussion of practical difficulties encountered by observers at sea.
- Practical training on fish identification, measuring, biological sampling and sex determination, use of equipment, writing up data etc.

Work on the revised / updated observer guide is still underway.

Activity 3: IT equipment

Initially it was proposed to purchase this in the UK, but a more practical solution has now been found by Cheikh-Baye Braham to procure it in Mauritania, which is underway.