



WORLD AT FIVE

Canary Islands fast ferries 'taking a deadly toll on whales'

Scientists fear that bigger, faster boats catering to growing numbers of tourists are wreaking havoc in the ecologically sensitive region, writes Charlie Devereux



A quarter of sperm whale deaths in the Canaries are believed to be caused by human activity
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Charlie Devereux, Madrid

Thursday April 28 2022, 5.00pm BST, The Times

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In early March the documentary film-maker Felipe Ravina received a call that a dead sperm whale had been spotted floating off the southern coast of Tenerife, sliced in two.

He grabbed his camera equipment and a drone and drove to Los Cristianos, a port that serves as one of the main ferry connections with the rest of the [Canaries archipelago](#). The video

he shot, which he shared later on Instagram, was enough evidence for veterinary pathologists at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria to conclude that it had died in a collision with a passenger ferry.

“This isn’t an isolated case,” Ravina said. “Sperm whales with [signs of collisions](#) with large boats appear every year.”



The whales are often found washed up or dead in the water, sometimes sliced in half
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Such collisions in the Canaries are occurring at an alarming rate as the density and speed of marine traffic increases in one of the species’ breeding grounds. Each year the pathologists examine about 60 whales and dolphins that have either washed up on beaches or are found floating dead offshore.

A quarter of the deaths are caused by human activity, the creatures having been struck by ferries or cargo ships, or caught in fishing nets. Sperm whales are the worst affected by ferry collisions, with one or two cases a year, said Antonio Fernandez, director of the Institute for Animal Health at Las Palmas University, who heads the team of pathologists. Fin whales, right whales, pilot whales and beaked whales have died in similar circumstances.

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CANCELACIÓN GRATIS

Five weeks after Ravina filmed the dead sperm whale, five passengers aboard a trimaran ferry travelling between Tenerife and Gran Canaria reported seeing blood in the water and the body of a whale cut in half, according to Natacha Aguilar, a marine biologist at the University of La Laguna, who spoke to them. The ferry operator, Fred. Olsen, denied responsibility. The boat in question was inspected later and showed no evidence of a collision, said Juan Ignacio Liaño, director of Fred. Olsen Express lines, although they had noticed that its stabiliser had become detached from its anchorage, which had caused damage to the hull.

Fernandez said that without a carcass or photographic evidence it would be hard to establish which boat had done the damage, or whether there had been a collision at all: the trimaran passengers may have seen a whale that was already dead. That shows the difficulty in establishing the number of collisions occurring in the waters off the Canaries. It is likely that the number is significantly higher than that reported by the pathologists.



Sperm whales are classed as a vulnerable species. They can live for about 70 years
REINHARD MINK/GETTY IMAGES

“It’s reasonable to suspect that the number of animals that may have been struck and died and haven’t been found is greater than the number of animals we’ve been able to study and been able to diagnose a definitive collision,” Fernandez added.

Aguilar says the death rate from collisions exceeds the sperm whale’s reproduction rate of 1 per cent a year. A 2015 study she carried out with colleagues estimated a population of 224 sperm whales in the archipelago. Whales that wash up on beaches are “the tip of the iceberg” of total deaths from ferry strikes, she adds, and if collisions continue at the present rate it could mean

a significant decline in the Canary Islands’ sperm whale population.

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Collisions began to increase significantly in 1999 with the introduction of fast ferries, usually catamarans or trimarans, which can travel at 40 knots (46mph), more than twice the speed of conventional ferries. In a collision, their sharp bows can split the whales in two. Today there are more than 20,000 high-speed ferry connections between the islands, according to a 2019 report commissioned by the Canaries government.



Collisions increased after the introduction of fast ferries. Fred Olsen found no evidence of a collision after a dead whale was spotted by passengers on one of its boats

ALAMY

When the fast ferries were introduced, Aguilar said, “we warned the government that these ferries weren’t a good idea for the Canaries because the archipelago is a global hotspot for cetacean biodiversity and abundance, and if you mix that with high-speed boats there’s evidently a higher risk of collisions”.



The pathologists hope their grim discoveries will raise awareness of the species' plight in the area

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Scientists say the solution could be as simple as establishing seasonal speed limits in specific areas where the whales are known to congregate. Mandatory speed limits imposed on the east coast of the United States have been shown to be effective in reducing collisions with the North Atlantic right whale.

The government is financing a pilot project with ferry companies to develop thermal cameras that can detect the presence of whales. Tests have shown the technology is effective but Aguilar said they still needed to develop software to help to interpret the images and warn ship crews, while avoiding false alarms.

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Other measures to prevent deaths from human contact have

proven effective. Scientists successfully campaigned to ban the use of underwater sonar by the Spanish military, which confused beaked whales into surfacing so quickly that they suffer fatal attacks of the bends — decompression sickness caused by dissolved gases emerging as bubbles inside the body tissues during decompression. Since 2004 the mass beachings they used to cause have been eliminated.

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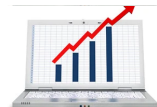
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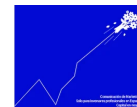
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I

Ian Clinton • 1 DAY AGO



Tragic and upsetting, surely we can do better than this.

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D

Damien Harper • 8 HOURS AGO



Of course we can, but business is far more important.

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K

Kafkas legacy • 18 HOURS AGO



Other than going more slowly what do you propose?

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↩ 4 replies

N

Neil Weatherley • 22 HOURS AGO



So it was predicted and we did nothing. It seems it would be quite easy to adjust the route and timing on the speed limits. Why the delay in taking action? All to save a few minutes on a holiday trip.

[Reply](#) ☆ [Recommend \(24\)](#)

M

Mr Phillip Hopkins • 13 HOURS AGO



You can't do that - holidays are more important than whales or dolphins. After all they're only animals unlike us humans who need to have our jollies regardless of the consequences to the planet.

[Reply](#) ☆ [Recommend \(9\)](#)

M

Mouse • 22 HOURS AGO



Human kind, not.

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J

Janice Lindsay • 18 HOURS AGO



Another triumph of technology catering to the selfishness of humans.

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- D** **DS** • 10 HOURS AGO ...
Humans kill everything and anything in their quest for consumption.
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- D** **DiB** • 5 HOURS AGO ...
And pleasure.
[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(1\)](#)
- F** **Fromthefront** • 8 HOURS AGO ...
Yep, that's why we are top of the food chain. Maybe you would rather we weren't?
[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend](#)
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- L** **luke** • 23 HOURS AGO ...
Fred Olsen are relentless & big for economy over here. Shame, but they won't be moved.
[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(5\)](#)
- P** **Peter Humphreys** • 22 HOURS AGO ...
It wouldn't hurt to have slower ferries, would it?
[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(17\)](#)
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- D** **Derbyshire** • 10 HOURS AGO ...
I recall environmentally concerned people asking us to use the rival company Armas which uses conventional ferries in the Canaries. Next time we go to La Gomera we will do so. Thanks Times for highlighting this.
[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(6\)](#)
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- T** **Teresa Hughes** • 20 HOURS AGO ...
Slightly ironic - I was immensely privileged to watch a sperm whale from the deck of a Fred Olsen cruise ship last August coming back from Iceland.
[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(3\)](#)

- J** **John Dyer** • 20 HOURS AGO ...

The first and third photos are truly beautiful. The rest? Horrific!

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(3\)](#)



Praetorian • 8 HOURS AGO



Passing Gibraltar the other day our liner informed us that it would

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