

ABSTRACT

In February 2009, a unique partnership between educators, field researchers, and organizations in the United States, Dominican Republic, and Haiti were launched. The goal was to develop a pilot project to raise awareness and promote the protection of marine mammals in Haiti. After more than a decade of collaborative field initiatives and the establishment of a permanent research site in Petite Riviere de Nippes, Haiti, this partnership became Haiti Ocean Project (HOP), a 501c3 nonprofit organization in the United States and a local Haitian NGO in Haiti. HOP has already documented at least 13 marine mammal species, including dwarf sperm whales, short-finned pilot whales, beaked whales, pantropical spotted and bottlenose dolphins, manatees, and sperm and humpback whales in Haitian waters. Of these species, some are residents, including sperm whales and pantropical spotted dolphins, which have been observed often with their calves. The proximity of many of these species close to shore is enhanced by underwater canyons that drop quickly to over 10,000 feet. The mission of HOP is to protect Haiti's marine life through community outreach, advocacy, and science. HOP also works to facilitate cooperation and support for Haitian environment ministries and marine protected areas; conduct educational outreach to students and local communities; organize capacity building and training for networks of local fishermen and evaluate the potential for local ecotourism involving whale and dolphin watching. The identification, categorization, and documentation of the marine mammal population is a first step toward promoting the long-term protection of Haiti's marine resources. The Project has documented numerous marine mammal directed and opportunistic take and entanglement in fishing gear—primary threats to marine mammal populations in Haiti. Ongoing collaboration with local fishing communities provides a significant opportunity for intervention in the directed take of marine mammals, heightened awareness, and the exploration of alternative livelihoods. A more rigorous scientific research program in development will incorporate citizen science and complement community outreach and traditional knowledge integral to HOP's grassroots approach.

Through Haiti Ocean Project (HOP), Haitian youth are on the frontlines of marine conservation, building relationships with fishing communities, securing cooperative management agreements with Marine Protected Areas, documenting directed and incidental take of marine mammals and other marine life, and intervening to save injured wildlife.

Community Building: In over 13 years of community outreach, HOP has:

- Fostered 1 co-management agreement with Baraderes-Cayemite Marine Protected Area
- Conducted over 50 education and outreach workshops to students and local communities
- Conducted over 40 capacity building workshops to train local fisherman
- Evaluated the potential for local ecotourism involving whale and dolphin watching
- Established a marine discovery center and base for scientific research
- Saved 150 marine megafauna species

Field Surveys: HOP has documented the presence of at least 13 marine mammals, including:

- Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*)
- Dwarf sperm whales (*Kogia simus*)
- Pantropical spotted dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*)
- Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)
- Short-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*)
- Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)
- West-Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*)

Field Response: HOP has responded to strandings and directed take of 177 individuals

- Sea turtles (172 Hawksbill, green, leatherback and loggerhead)
- Manatees (5 adults and 1 juvenile female, 4 different locations on north and south coasts between 2019 and 2022)
- Cetaceans (9 including Dwarf sperm, humpback, minke and beaked whales; Risso's and spotted dolphins).

For more information: haitioceanproject.net

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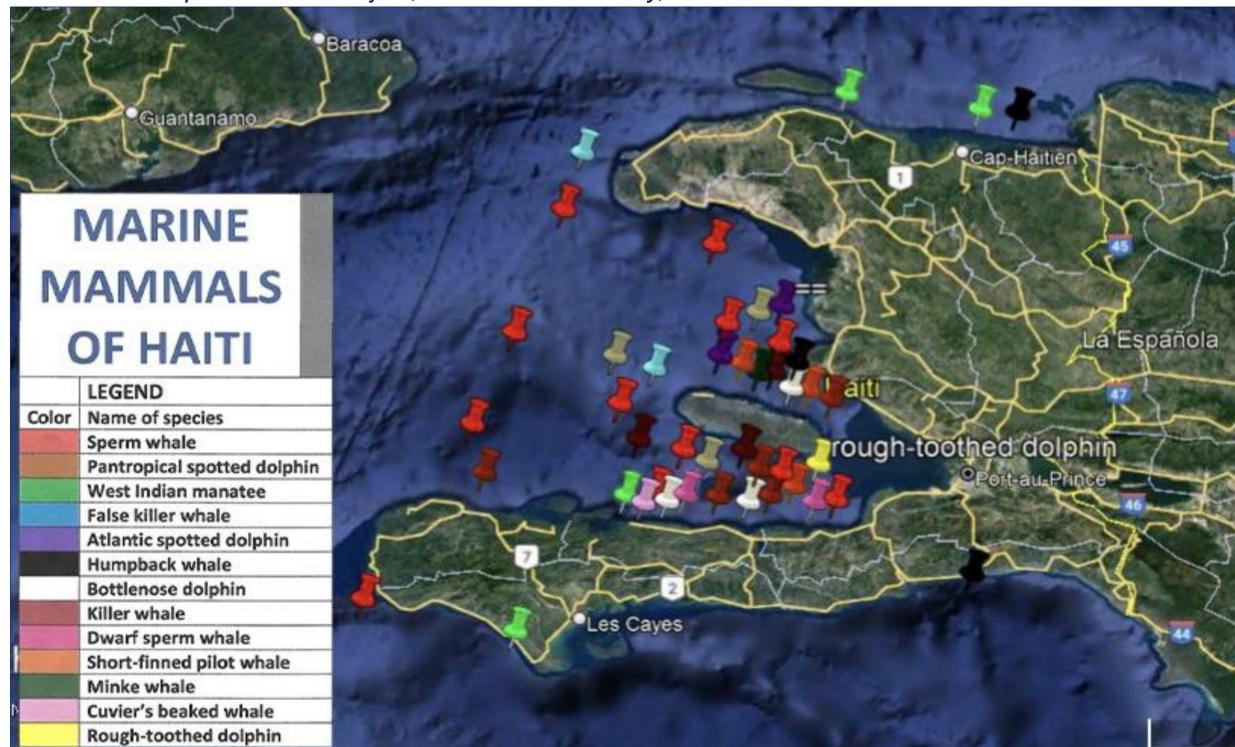
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Marine mammal field sightings in Haiti. Although there have been no formal scientific population surveys conducted through HOP to assess marine mammals that exist in Haiti waters to date, we have consistent and replicable sightings data that support evidence of a variety of species of whales and dolphins in Haitian waters. This is based on sightings from the authors who live in, and travel to, Haiti on a regular basis and from fishermen, boaters, and community members. We are hopeful this initial sightings data will result in future formal population studies while supporting a marine discovery center, whale and dolphin watching, educational outreach, and other HOP elements underway.



Pantropical spotted dolphin



Sperm whale surfacing



Dwarf Sperm Whale speared and killed



Manatee caught in net