Song recorded near a super-group of humpback whales on a mid-latitude feeding ground off South Africa

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Abstract: Humpback whales (Megaptera novaeangliae) are well known for their complex song which is culturally transmitted and produced by males. However, the function of singing behavior remains poorly understood. Song was observed from 57 min of acoustic recording in the presence of feeding humpback whales aggregated in the near-shore waters on the west coast of South Africa. The structural organization of the song components, lack of overlap between song units, and consistency in relative received level suggest the song was produced by one “singer.” The unusual timing and location of song production adds further evidence of plasticity in song production.

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1. Introduction

Humpback whales (Megaptera novaeangliae) are renowned for their characteristic song (Payne and McVay, 1971; Winn et al., 1981) produced by males (Darling et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2008). Linked to breeding behavior, singing activity peaks during the winter season on low-latitude breeding grounds (Winn and Winn, 1978; Helweg et al., 1992). However, a growing body of evidence details singing during migration (Norris et al., 1999; Noad and Cato, 2007) and on high latitude feeding grounds (e.g., Mattila et al., 1987; Clark and Clapham, 2004; Stimpert et al., 2012; Vu et al., 2012; Garland et al., 2013; Magnúsdóttir et al., 2014), suggesting a flexible use of song.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC, 1998) has designated the west coast of southern Africa as a migratory corridor for Breeding Stock B (BSB) humpback whales. BSB is made up of two stocks: BSB1, breeding in the Gulf of Guinea from Angola northwards and BSB2 whose breeding locality remains unknown (Best, 2018). The number of whales in the Benguela Current Ecosystem on the west coast of South Africa peaks from June to July, coincidental with the northward migration toward Southern Hemisphere winter breeding areas. A second peak from October to December is concurrent with the southward movement to high latitude summer feeding grounds (Barendse et al., 2010; Best and Cherry, 2010; Elwen et al., 2014).

In general, humpback whale numbers have increased since the international ban on commercial whaling and the BSB population is increasing (IWC, 2012). The Benguela upwelling ecosystem is an extremely nutrient rich environment (Fréon et al., 2009). Recently (2011 onwards) large numbers of whales have been observed forming aggregations exceeding 20 animals per group, termed “super groups” (Findlay et al., 2017). These whales are abundant from October to February (Barendse et al., 2011) and are feeding on euphausiid shrimp (Euphausia lucens) (Barendse et al., 2010; Findlay et al., 2017). The number of humpback whales feeding in super-groups is highly unusual.
in mid- to low-latitudes, with estimated group sizes of up to 200 individuals reported from western South Africa (Findlay et al., 2017). It may be that some BSB humpback whales suspend their southward migration to feed in South African waters in the spring and summer months (Best et al., 1995). Alternatively, feeding aggregations may comprise a non-breeding migration of young, physically immature animals or represent the immigration of young non-breeding animals from IWC Breeding Stock C (BSC) during their southward migration (Findlay et al., 2017, Fig. 1).

Here we investigate an occurrence of humpback whale song recorded at this mid-latitude feeding ground in late spring (November). Humpback whale song was first described by Payne and McVay (1971) and is recognised by the structural repetition of sound features. The most basic are song units (uninterrupted sounds) which are stereotyped and combined to form a phrase. An unbroken sequence of similar phrases is termed a theme, with several distinct themes combining to form a song. We identified song following this widely recognised paradigm. This work forms part of a larger project investigating the acoustic behavior of humpback whales in western South Africa.

2. Methods

Acoustic and surface behavioral data were collected in South Africa during 2015 and 2016 as part of an ongoing project to investigate the social (i.e., non-song) sounds of humpback whales. Several small research and commercial vessels were used to locate whales during both dedicated scientific surveys and trips to undertake commercial film work. Super-groups of humpback whales were located off the west coast of South Africa within a 180 km range from St Helena Bay (32° 38' S, 17° 54' E) in the north to Hout Bay (34° 05' S, 18° 19' E) in the south from October to February (Fig. 1).

Throughout this study, recordings were made using either a HTI-96-MIN (High Tech
The relatively short recording duration and associated noise interference (wave and engine) obstruct a full sequence analysis of themes and complete song structure. An
Fig. 2. Stereotyped song phrases were observed throughout the recording of humpback whales on November 1, 2016, which were repeated to form themes [(A)–(G)]. Units are identified numerically on each spectrogram. Unit 4 consists of a series of subunits, indicated by a “+” sign. Spectrograms are displayed on a standard x axis time scale of 0–8 s, apart from G which is on a 0–9 s time scale, as indicated by “*.” Frequency range shown 0–8 kHz, sampling rate 22.05 kHz, fast Fourier transform (FFT) 2056.

Fig. 3. Examples of repeated phrases forming theme A, which was highly stereotyped and clearly observed throughout the recording. High stereotypy in unit frequency and temporal production are illustrated here in examples (A) and (B) with the recording time relative to session start time indicated. Spectrograms are displayed on a standard x axis time scale of 0–45 s. Frequency range shown 0–8 kHz, sampling rate 22.05 kHz, FFT 2056.
analysis of theme order revealed no consistent patterning in transitions between one theme and the next. However, we did note that between stereotyped themes, there often occurred “unpatterned themes” (Payne and Payne, 1985) whereby the stereotypy in phrase production ceased and the units appeared less stereotyped and somewhat jumbled in presentation. Unpatterned themes contained a variable number of units (2 to 18). Following this, the next theme with stereotypy in unit and phrase production was reinstated.

We did not observe or acoustically localise a singing whale, consequently we cannot determine with certainty whether it was located within the focal super-group and actively feeding, or whether we were coincidentally recording an outlying whale engaged in another type of behavior. However, song units were non-overlapping, stereotyped in structure and temporal production, and relatively consistent in received level throughout the recording, indicating that they originated from one animal. For example, song unit 2 (a tonal call with a fundamental frequency between 600 and 800 Hz) was the most commonly found unit and dominated the session, being clearly identified 123 times. This unit was recorded with a high received level SNR throughout recording, with a relative peak power which changed little during the recording. At 10 min 18 s, i.e., close to the recording start, the received peak power was 70.9 dB and at 43 min 41 s, i.e., close to the recording end, it was 70.0 dB. Overall, the relative peak power of song units ranged between 41.7 and 71.1 dB. Social calls were identified throughout the recording and these occasionally overlapped the song units in time and sometimes frequency, in an unsystematic manner.

4. Discussion

Here we report the occurrence of song at a mid-latitude feeding ground in South African waters. In general, the production of song in humpback whales is strongly linked to breeding behavior, with structured song most ubiquitous at low-latitude, warm water breeding grounds (reviewed in Helweg et al., 1992). However, we recorded song in late spring, after the completion of the breeding season in Angola and Gabon, and in an area where breeding is not thought to occur (Barendse, 2011; Findlay et al., 2017). Although singing during migration toward feeding grounds (e.g., Norris et al., 1999) and on feeding grounds (e.g., Stimpert et al., 2012) is well documented, this is the first time it has been documented in western South Africa.

Humpback whale song can travel several kilometres (Helweg et al., 1992; Frankel et al., 1995; Clark and Clapham, 2004), with distant song detected up to hundreds of kilometres away (Risch et al., 2012; Gong et al., 2014). On breeding grounds, singing males are usually solitary and stationary at depths of 15 to 25 m (Au et al., 2006). Our recording could therefore originate from a lone singing whale located a distance from the super-group. Humpback whales have also been recorded singing while actively migrating at speeds of up to 7 km per hour with faster bursts of movement possible during song production (Noad and Cato, 2007). However, the relatively constant received level of the most ubiquitous song unit (unit 2) indicates the animal did not move a long distance during the nearly 1 h of recording. Acoustic tagging studies indicate that humpback whales may continue to sing whilst engaging in active feeding, including diving deeper than 100 m and lunging (Stimpert et al., 2012). However, Stimpert et al. (2012) acknowledged that the song they documented may have originated from a close by conspecific and not an actively feeding animal. Consequently, the singing animal we recorded may have been located within the super-group and engaged in feeding activity, singing from a stationary position or moving within the vicinity of the actively feeding whales.

Complete analysis of the song was not possible due to the relatively short recording duration and intervention due to boat repositioning. However, our data could...
successfully be analysed within the song framework first proposed by Payne and McVay (1971) of units, phrases, and themes. In addition, we identified unpatterned themes (Payne and Payne, 1985). A less stereotyped form of song has been reported from feeding grounds (Stimpert et al., 2012), where unidentified phrases, periods of poorly refined song (i.e., no obvious pattern), and periods of non-song production have been documented. In our recording, the high incidence of unpatterned themes and the apparent inconsistencies in theme transitional order may indicate lower stereotypy in song on this migration and feeding area compared to song on the breeding grounds. Additional high quality recordings obtained from more individuals will help better elucidate the repertoire of song phrases and song structure from individuals on the west coast of Southern Africa.

Song production at high latitude feeding grounds may facilitate the cultural transmission of acoustic signals between stocks (Garland et al., 2013), with song novelty thought to convey a breeding advantage to an individual (Noad et al., 2000; Parsons et al., 2008). Findlay et al. (2017) recently suggested that super-groups of whales on the west coast of South Africa may contain humpback whales from BSC, usually located on the east coast of South Africa. If so, a detailed comparison of song structure from BSB and BSC together with song recorded in the presence of super-groups may provide information on the origin of these feeding whales. These data are currently being obtained for such a comparison.

In explaining the occurrence of song on feeding grounds, Clark and Clapham (2004) suggest that breeding extends geographically and temporally into feeding grounds in spring and early summer. Elevated testosterone levels could also promote singing activity into shoulder seasons (spring and autumn) (Clark and Clapham, 2004; Vu et al., 2012), which could explain singing in the absence of clear breeding behaviour or opportunities. The potential for animals to switch between feeding and display behaviour at feeding grounds has been further highlighted by tagging studies (Stimpert et al., 2012). Although we did not observe mating behaviour, the possibility that song is used within a breeding context by animals engaged in feeding or associated with prey patches on the west coast of South Africa cannot be discounted. The suggestion that whales forming super-groups may be young animals (Findlay et al., 2017) is not counter to the observation of singing activity as Herman et al. (2013) provide evidence that some immature males also sing. However, if singing does originate from the immature animals observed in super-groups, this could explain the lack of observed breeding behaviour.

Understanding why we detected song at this mid-latitude feeding area requires considerable further information on the identity of singing whales, the prevalence and context of singing behavior, as well as the social dynamics of animals aggregated within super-groups or associated with them. Further research is underway to address these questions for humpback whales utilising waters on the west coast of South Africa.

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References and links


