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A KILLER WHALE (*ORCINUS ORCA* L.) ATTACKS
AND SINKS A SAILING BOAT



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Abstract. — On March 9th, 1976, the Italian sailing boat GUIA III, off the Brazilian coasts, is attacked and sunk by a killer whale (*Orcinus orca* L.). Whereas it is for the moment impossible to explain the motivations of such attack, it is noteworthy that the cetaceans were sighted almost contemporarily with other smaller Delphinidae, and that they did not attack the swimming men.

Riassunto. — *Un Orca (Orcinus orca L.) attacca e affonda una barca a vela.*

Il 9 Marzo 1976 l'imbarcazione a vela italiana GUIA III, al largo delle coste del Brasile, viene attaccata ed affondata da un'orca (*Orcinus orca* L.). Mentre non si conoscono le motivazioni di tale attacco, degno di interesse è il fatto che i cetacei siano stati avvistati quasi in concomitanza con altri più piccoli Delfinidi, e che non abbiano aggredito gli uomini in mare.

On March 9th, 1976, about at 9.30 a.m. GMT, 9°40' N and 34°30' W, off the Brazilian coasts, the Italian sailing boat GUIA III, which participated in the transoceanic race Rio de Janeiro-Portsmouth, was attacked and sunk by a killer whale (*Orcinus orca* L.).

On the basis of the direct description of two of the protagonists, part of the crew during the wreck, Dr. Giorgio Di Mola and Mr. Claudio Cuoghi, we here report some information about the fact.

Typical meteorological conditions of the trade winds zone: wind from NE, speed 25 knots, clear sky.

The boat's course crossed a quite large school of flying fish, particularly nervous, to the point that some predators were supposed to be in the surroundings; in fact a group of small Delphinidae was sighted in the meantime.

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After a while the event happened, even before that anyone of the crew would realize the presence of the big cetaceans. Only a dull stroke was heard, and suddenly the boat began to take on water. A leak, 30×40 cm. large, was located close to the bow, under the water line, in the port planking, built with stripes crossed and glued together to the total thickness of 20 mm.

Only now the five (or four, according to someones) big Delphinidae appeared on the surface, easily recognizable as belonging to the species *Orcinus orca* L., on the basis of the following morphological features: very high, triangular shaped dorsal fin; coloration: dorsally black, ventrally white, clearly delimited, and two oval shaped patches behind the eyes; size: about 5-6 meters.

The cetaceans staid, inquisitive, in the nearest proximity of the boat, which was already immobilized by the huge amount of incoming water. One of them in particular, apparently the responsible one of the leak, kept motionless a few inches apart of the broadside, giving the impression of wanting to support the sinking boat.

In the meantime, after the order to abandon the boat given by the French skipper, Jerome Poncet, transshipments from GUIA III to the life-raft were done: in such occasion very often the six crew were swimming a few meters from the whales, without eliciting any observable reaction.

Finally in no longer than fifteen minutes the boat sank and disappeared together with the cetaceans who caused its wreck.

A few minutes afterwards a pod of small porpoises was sighted again.

Two very outstanding facts appear from this description: firstly, the almost contemporary presence of killer whales and porpoises in the same area, which makes us hypotize a kind of commensalism, not unlike the one observed between *Orcinus orca* L. and *Balaenoptera physalus* L. fishing together on herrings (TOMILIN, 1957). Secondly, the killer whale, predator above all, did not attack the swimming men, who would have been very easy preys, therefore confirming a peculiarity of these animals: not to attack men.

Concerning the motivations which could have pushed the killer whale to attack, we only can for the moment make some assumptions.

Several other cases of manifest aggressions to boats by killer whales are reported. In 1958, off Long Island, New York, the fishing boat « Tiger shark » struck with a harpoon a killer whale, who, after having got himself free, chased the boat for a long time, and, before leaving, lifted it clear out of the water. In 1962, off Bellingham, on the west coast of the United States, a group of men working for an oceanarium cap-

tured with a rope a female killer whale; after 20 minutes a male arrived, probably drawn in the area by the distress calls of the female, and together they attacked the craft (CALDWELL & CALDWELL, 1966). Finally, on June 15th, 1972, at about one hundred miles East of the Galapagos Islands, the Scotch family Robertsons, during their round-the-world trip aboard the wooden schooner « Lucette », 13 meters long and weighing 19 tons, was attacked by three individuals from a pod of about 20 killer whales, and sank in 60 seconds. In this case too the motivations are quite unknown, but fortunately they could prove the fact that killer whales don't attack swimming men.

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