

# Records of the Harbour Porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in the Finnish Region based on the Digitised Press Data

Otto Latva\*, Noora Kallioniemi, Silja Laine, Aino Jämsä, Heli Rantala and Tiina Tiilikainen

University of Turku, Department of Cultural History, Arcanuminkuja 1, FI20500 Turku, Finland  
\*corresponding author's e-mail: otto.latva@utu.fi

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This study examines the historical occurrence of the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in Finnish coastal waters using a dataset of 413 records derived from digitised Finnish press, written in Finnish and Swedish, from the 19th century to the 1970s. The records identified through multilingual search terms, and analysed by time and location, reveal that porpoises were encountered across the Finnish coastline, particularly in summertime from 1828 to 1939, but sightings declined sharply after the 1940s. Most reported individuals were adults. In addition to occasional encounters, porpoises were frequently killed or caught as bycatch in fisheries. The study demonstrates the value of historical datasets in reconstructing long-term population changes and demonstrates the potential of combining cultural-historical and ecological perspectives. It provides new insights into the human-porpoise relationship and supports conservation efforts for this critically endangered Baltic population by integrating digitised archival materials with ecological interpretation.

## Introduction

The harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is one of the smallest toothed whales and the only cetacean species that naturally dwells in the Baltic Sea including the Finnish sea region. The population in the Baltic Sea is classified as critically endangered although the porpoise is classified as a globally viable species. This is because the population has declined at a historically rapid rate since the early 20th century. According to various estimates, porpoises in the Baltic Sea were considerably more abundant at the beginning of the 20th century than they are today. The current population is estimated to be

only approximately 500 individuals (Amundin *et al.* 2022).

Porpoises have inhabited the Baltic Sea from prehistoric times to the present day (Forsten 1975; Koschinski 2001; Sommer *et al.* 2008; Lõugas and Bērziņš 2023). Harbour porpoises have also lived in Finnish coastal waters for thousands of years. The oldest porpoise bones found on the Finnish coast have been dated to as far back as 7000 years ago (Ukkonen and Mannermaa 2017). However, more detailed information on observations has only been published since the 19th century (Mela 1882; Mela and Kivirikko 1909; Kivirikko 1940; Loisa 2016). Studies published in the latter half of the 20th

century and in the 21st century have noted that the number of porpoises began to decline significantly in Finland after the mid-20th century (Karjalainen 1972; Loisa 2016). Many studies have documented that the collapse of the porpoise population in the whole Baltic Sea occurred around the same time. Porpoises were still commonly encountered in the Baltic Sea in the first half of the 19th century. However, records decline sharply towards the 1970s (Berggren and Arrhenius 1995; Koschinski 2001; Skóra and Kuklik 2003; Loisa 2016; Koschinski *et al.* 2024). Intensive hunting was one of the reasons given for the collapse of the porpoise population in the mid-20th century. The impact of environmental toxins such as PCB and DDT that ended up in the Baltic Sea in the 1960s and 1970s are also believed to have contributed to the porpoise population's decline (Koschinski 2001). In addition, the severe ice conditions in the 1920s and 1940s have also been suggested as one of the reasons causing the deaths of porpoises (Karjalainen 1972; Loisa 2016).

Previous studies on historical changes in porpoise abundance in the Baltic Sea have been based on a wide range of observations collected over an extended period. These include physical evidence such as prehistoric bone finds and porpoise carcasses donated to researchers. In addition, information has been gathered from literary sources, newspapers, journals, and interviews (Koschinski 2001; Lõugas and Bērziņš 2023; HELCOM n.d.).

According to Olli Loisa (2016), a special expert on the study of cetaceans in Finland, historical records of harbour porpoises in the Finnish region have previously been collected by Kujala (2006) and Määttänen (1991). Kujala collected records of harbour porpoises on commission from the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, while Määttänen collected her own data. Except for a few prehistoric finds, the collected observations focus on the 19th and 20th centuries due to far fewer written sources available for the Finnish region before these centuries. Of these, only Kujala's porpoise records are currently available. However, Kujala's records have not been published separately, but they have been stored in the database of the Finnish environmental administration and the HELCOM/

ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database (Loisa 2016; HELCOM n.d.). According to Loisa (2016), Kujala's data include 192 records of at least 269 harbour porpoises in Finnish territorial waters from 1815 to 1999. This material has served as the basis for a HELCOM/ASCOBANS database, which has recorded 249 observations of harbour porpoises in the Finnish maritime area from the 1800 to 2016. (HELCOM n.d.).

We managed to collect 413 records of porpoises from newspapers, periodicals, and journals written in Finnish and Swedish and published in Finland from the early 19th century to the 1970s. The HELCOM/ASCOBANS database from the same time frame contains 175 porpoise observations, some of which were collected not only from natural history collections but also from newspapers, periodicals, and journals. For this reason, the HELCOM/ASCOBANS database already contains 117 porpoise records that are also listed among those we collected. However, 296 of the records we gathered are not found in the HELCOM/ASCOBANS database (HELCOM n.d.).

All the porpoise records analysed in this article have been collected from the material digitised by the Finnish National Library, which currently contains more than 28 million pages of press material published in Finland since the 1770s (Kansalliskirjasto n.d.). The National Library of Finland began digitising newspapers, journals and periodicals in the 2000s, and more digitised material is added every year. The porpoise records have been collected from the Finnish newspapers and periodicals published in Finland's two official languages, Finnish and Swedish.

The digitised press material provided by the Finnish National Library has been used previously in a few other studies examining the historical occurrence of various organisms in Finland. Mehtälä and Vuorisalo (2010), for example, used the material to examine observations of nightingales in 19th-century Helsinki. Vuorisalo *et al.* (2014) examined the historical occurrence of red foxes in urban environments, using digitised newspaper material as one data source. At the time these studies were published, the National Library of Finland had not digitised much press material beyond the 19th century, but today it

can be used to examine the historical records of different species more extensively from the 20th century onwards. Examples of this are the recent studies examining the long-term human relationship with cyanobacteria, ticks, and sea eagles in Finland, in which data from almost the entire 20th century has been analysed extensively. (Latva *et al.* 2024; Latva 2024; Salmi 2024). The data have been examined in these studies, however, mainly from the perspective of how the aforementioned species were perceived in the public discussion. The data have been analysed more systematically in this study on porpoises with the aim of calculating the number of porpoise sightings in Finnish waters and examining how porpoises have been observed, in which seasons, and what their approximate age and size have been. The time frame of our study begins with the first press report we found on porpoises in 1828 and ends in the late 1970s, when the systematic collection of data on the endangerment of species and their threat classification began in Finland (Vuorisalo and Laihonon 2000).

Our research question in this article is whether the records of harbour porpoises found in digitised newspapers, periodicals and journals change the previous understanding of the occurrence of harbour porpoises on the Finnish coast and more broadly in the Baltic Sea region. We also look at how the porpoise records we have collected are distributed across different seasons and what the size and age of the porpoises encountered on the Finnish coast have been. We additionally present a completely new and large dataset of porpoise records in Finnish territorial waters from the early 19th century to the end of the 1970s and explain how this historical data was collected and what should be taken into account when compiling and analysing it.

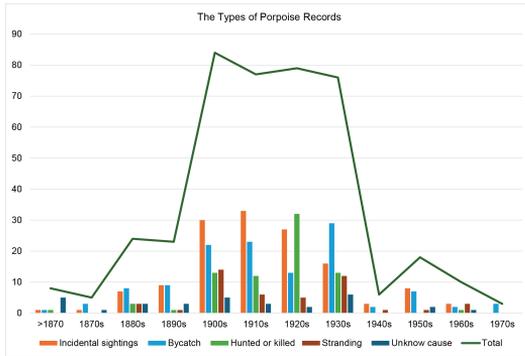
## Material and methods

We searched for porpoise records in digitised material using the Finnish and Swedish name for the porpoise, "pyöriäinen", "merisika" and "tumlare". Using this method, we found a total of 5902 Finnish and 24 573 Swedish hits in the digitised data. All 30 475 of these texts found from newspapers, periodicals and journals were

then loaded into an Excel file, and all irrelevant hits that did not mention a concrete porpoise record were removed. We organised all porpoise observations in our dataset after this step so that one record was defined as an observation of one or more porpoises encountered at the same time. This means that, for example, reports of the same observation published in many newspapers and periodicals were combined under a single observation entry. Therefore, the dataset does not contain duplicates of the same sightings; each observation is unique. Our data set after this stage contained a total of 413 entries representing clearly documented porpoise observations in Finnish waters.

All 413 newspaper and periodical articles describing the just-mentioned concrete harbour porpoise records were sorted into a CSV file so that the following information was reported in different columns for each harbour porpoise record:

1. sea area in which the encounter with porpoise took place
2. the municipality or city where the encounter with porpoise took place
3. latitude of the encounter
4. longitude of the encounter
5. the exact location of the encounter (for instance, village or bay)
6. the exact location of the encounter mentioned in the source
7. date of the encounter
8. source language
9. whether the observation is mentioned in the HELCOM/ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database
10. date of the source
11. the name of the source (newspaper or periodical)
12. the name used for harbour porpoise in the source
13. length mentioned in the source
14. weight mentioned in the source
15. the number of porpoises
16. further information about the encounter
17. whether the record is mentioned to be incidental sightings, bycatch, hunted or killed, stranding, or unknown cause.
18. the link to the source in the National Library's digital database.



**Fig. 1.** Number of porpoise records from the beginning of the 19th century to 1975 and the types of encounters.

In this article, we have also determined the age of those porpoises for which the length was mentioned in connection with the observations reported in the press material. Neimanis *et al.* (2022), in their study on harbour porpoises stranded along the Swedish coast, defined porpoise age classes based on body size, referring to the studies by Lockyer (1995) and van Elk *et al.* (2019). We also adopt the same classification in this study. According to this system, harbour porpoises can be divided into the following size-based age classes: neonates < 0.91 m; calves > 0.91 to 1.18 m; juvenile males > 1.18 m to 1.29 m; juvenile females > 1.18 m to 1.39 m; adult males > 1.3 m; adult females > 1.4 m. The maximum size of harbour porpoises is generally reported to be approximately 1.9 m to 2 m in length (e.g. Lockyer 1995; Bjørge and Tolley 2009).

Using this CSV file, we were able to easily calculate percentages of the nature of the porpoise encounters and to create figures and maps of the records. QGIS program was used to make the maps. These maps include former and current borders of Finland and its historical parish division, in order to make it easier to locate the records of porpoises on the maps. The maps we have created are based on the 1938 parish map compiled by the Institute for the Languages of Finland. Our dataset also includes observations made before the territorial changes that occurred after the Second World War. For this reason, the dataset contains records of porpoises, for instance, from the Karelian Isthmus, which today belongs to the Russian Federation.

## Results

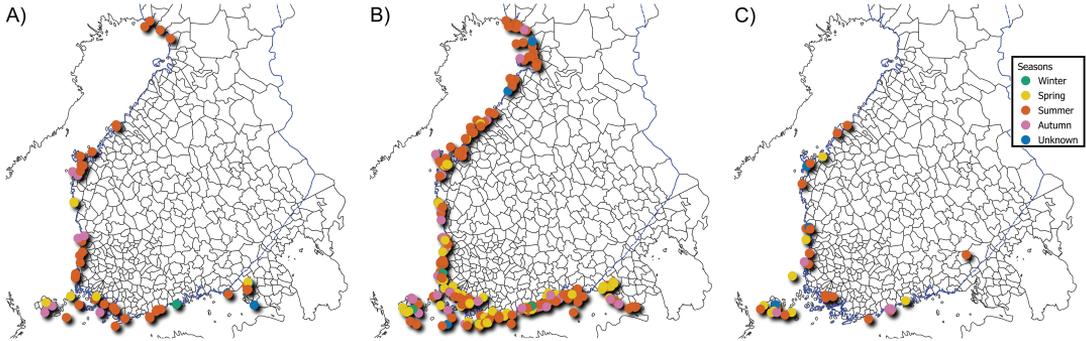
We found information on a total of 413 porpoise records, of which 296 are not mentioned in the HELCOM/ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database. These records contain information on at least 518 porpoises encountered in Finnish waters. The data show that the distribution of harbour porpoise records varied widely from decade to decade (Fig. 1). The temporal distribution of the observations is particularly pronounced in the first decades of the 20th century. The number of records in the 19th century is clearly higher than in the late 20th century. The number of sightings decline significantly in the 1940s and has not come anywhere close since then to the number recorded in the preceding decades.

### The Types of Porpoise Records

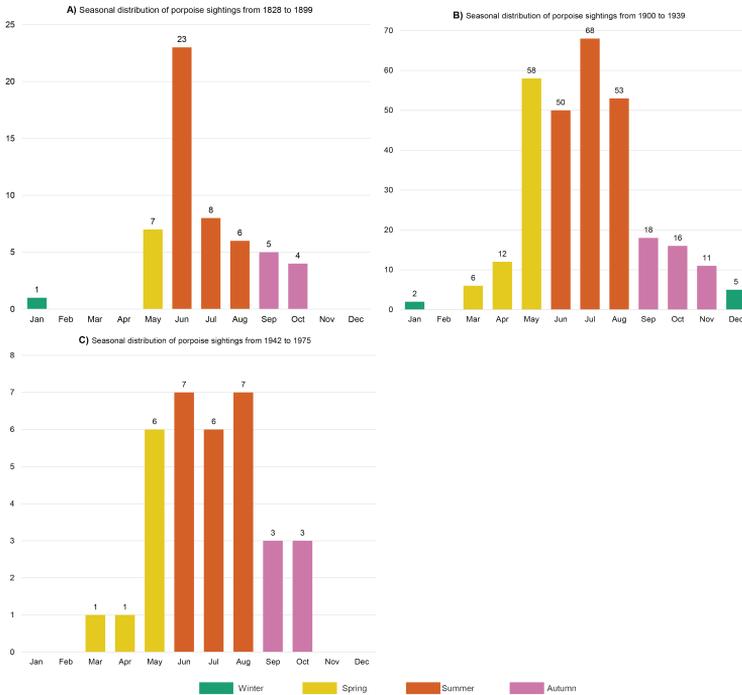
From all the 413 records we discovered, 138 were incidental sightings. According to our data, people encountered porpoises most often in this way. However, an almost equal proportion of records were based on porpoises attached to fishing nets or other fishing traps. There were 122 records of porpoises caught as bycatch. The number of porpoises hunted and killed is also a relatively high proportion of all records. A total of 76 mentions of hunted and killed porpoises were found in our data. The sources additionally mention 46 records of stranded porpoises. Alongside these, we found information on 31 porpoise records that were reported without any details of the encounter (Fig. 1).

### Distribution and seasonality of the observations

The data show that harbour porpoises have been spotted all along the Finnish coastline, from the Torne River at the border to Sweden in the north to the Finno-Russian border in eastern parts of the Gulf of Finland. The most significant decades in the records were the 1900s, 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. The number of records dropped dramatically after this, with only six porpoise records throughout the 1940s. Porpoise sightings began to concentrate in the southernmost marine areas



**Fig. 2.** A) all 60 records of porpoises in the Finnish region in the 19th century; B) all 316 records of porpoises in the Finnish region from 1900 to 1939; and C) all 37 records of porpoises in the Finnish region from 1942 to 1975.



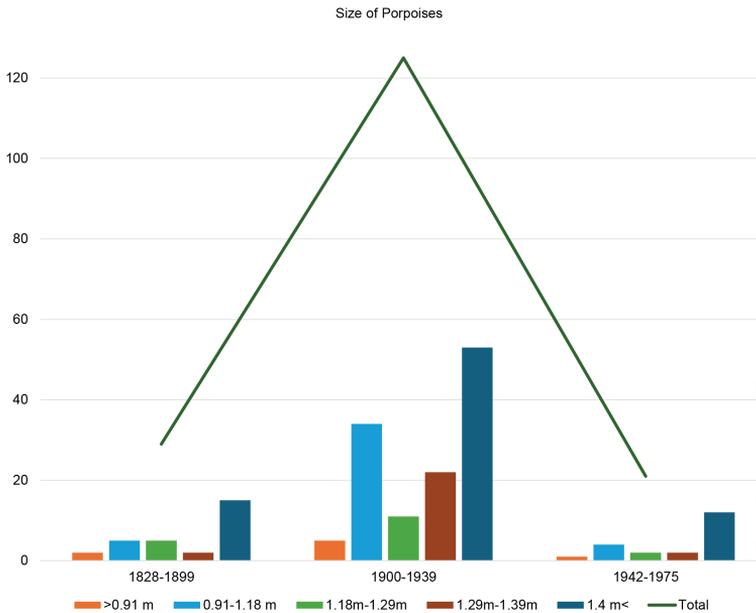
**Fig. 3.** A) seasonal distribution of sightings from 1828 to 1899; B) seasonal distribution of sightings from 1900 to 1939; and C) seasonal distribution of sightings from 1942 to 1975. Records with no information on the season were not added to the graphs.

of Finland as the number of records decreased sharply in the mid-20th century. Only one porpoise observation was recorded from the Bothnia Bay in the period from the 1940s to the 1970s, and it occurred in Kokkola in 1951 (Fig. 2).

The seasons have had a major influence on how porpoises have been observed and how far north these sightings have been made. By far the most porpoises have been recorded in the summer, that is, in June, July, and August, but also in May, one of the spring months. Only a few sightings of porpoises have been made

in the earlier spring months, March and April. Porpoises have been observed more often in autumn, especially in September and October, than in early spring. There are also a few winter-time observations from December and January but very few overall. These were often records of dead individuals stranded ashore. There are no porpoise records from February in the entire dataset (Fig. 3).

Porpoises were encountered in the 19th century and early 20th century as far north as the Bothnian Bay, particularly during the summer.



**Fig. 4.** Of all porpoise records, 42% included an estimate of the porpoise's length. The length data are categorised in the accompanying figure according to the classification method described in the Material and Methods section, by three different periods: 1828–1899, 1900–1939, and 1942–1975.

However, a few sightings were also made in September and October as far north as the city of Oulu. Only a handful of observations exist from spring, all from May. There are no springtime observations from farther north than Kokkola. No spring records of porpoises were made in the 19th century north of Kaskinen on the coast of Ostrobothnia. Wintertime encounters have not been made farther north than Uusikaupunki, which lies in the southern part of the Bothnian Sea. A few other observations come from Åland Sea and the Gulf of Finland.

### Size and age of the porpoises

Porpoises of various ages and sizes were encountered along the Finnish coast during the period we studied. However, nearly half of the records concerned adult porpoises. Of the observed individuals, only about one fifth were juveniles and another fifth were calves. Just 5% were neonates. It should be noted, however, that more than half of the data we collected did not include information on the length of the porpoises. There were also many observations in which the length was reported to be approximately 2 meters. We have interpreted these cases to be adult individuals (Fig. 4).

## Discussion

The new record data increase our knowledge of porpoises encountered in the Finnish sea area and the relationship of humans to these marine animals. It is important to obtain more accurate information on long-term changes in the porpoise population, because current statistics on the historical population of these marine animals are scarce (e.g. Koschinski *et al.* 2024).

The collected data reveal numerous details about encounters between humans and porpoises and the number of records of these marine animals. One of our most significant findings is that the data clearly demonstrate that porpoises were seen much more frequently in Finland in the decades preceding the 1940s than in the latter part of the 20th century. Records were also made in all sea areas, including the Bothnian Bay. The data thus confirm the previously established view that the porpoise population declined significantly in the Baltic Sea in the mid-20th century (Berggren and Arrhenius 1995; Koschinski 2001; Skóra and Kuklik 2003; Loisa 2016; Koschinski *et al.* 2024). The material we studied suggests that a dramatic decline in the porpoise population had already occurred on the Finnish coast during the Second World War in the 1940s.

This finding of a decline in the porpoise population in the 1940s supports the view presented by Matti Karjalainen (1972) that porpoise populations along the Finnish coast declined so drastically between 1939 and 1942 that they were believed to have disappeared completely from Finnish waters. Karjalainen attributed the collapse of the porpoise population to the severe winters of the 1930s and 1940s, which caused the sea to freeze over so extensively that many porpoises suffocated when they were unable to surface for air between dives. Our material also includes a newspaper article mentioning the severe frosts of the early 1940s and the porpoises that washed ashore in Sottunga, Åland during that time. It notes how these animals, previously described as common in Åland waters, were hardly seen at all after 1942 (Orre 2001). Porpoises did not disappear from Finnish waters in the 1940s; however, their numbers have never returned anywhere near the levels seen in the decades preceding that period.

The cold winters and ice cover along the Finnish coast, especially in the Gulf of Bothnia, are certainly one reason why the number of porpoise observations in Finnish marine areas has shown considerable seasonal variation. Most sightings along the Finnish coastline have been recorded during the period from May to August. Some observations have also been made in autumn, in September and October, as well as in early spring in April and a few in March. There are hardly any observations from the winter months. In addition to cold winters and ice cover, there may of course be other factors behind the seasonal variation in porpoise records. There was also variation in porpoise sightings based on the size of individuals, with nearly half of the porpoises observed along the Finnish coast being adults. Based on our data, there is, however, no noticeable variation in the records of individuals of different sizes related to time or season.

One of the records in our data was also made in Lake Saimaa in the summer of 1953, when a porpoise measuring 123 cm in length and weighing 37.7 kg was caught as bycatch (Anon 1953). However, there is no additional information available on the observation. Porpoises are known to occasionally stray into inland waters

via rivers. Mela and Kivirikko (1910) mention a porpoise that had ascended the Neva River into Lake Ladoga. A pod of porpoises was reported to have followed salmon up the Ångerman River to Kramfors in Sweden (Karjalainen 1972). Similar examples of porpoises detected in river environments can also be found elsewhere in Europe, for example, in the Elbe and Rhine rivers in Germany (Kinze *et al.* 2021). However, it should be noted that harbour porpoises do not frequently enter freshwater environments.

Regarding records of porpoises made in the early 20th century, it is significant to note the relatively large number of individuals that were killed. Our data show that it was common practice to shoot or beat porpoises to death with sticks and other blunt weapons when they were seen in the water. For example, in the 1920s, most porpoise sightings occurred in such a way that people were reported to have somehow killed the porpoise. Regarding this, it is important to note that porpoise hunting and killing have a long history in the Baltic Sea region (Koschinski 2001; Skóra and Kuklik 2003). Our material also suggests that porpoises often evoked negative feelings in Finland, particularly among fishers. They were considered a nuisance, for example, because they damaged fishing nets. On the other hand, our data also shows that many porpoises died after becoming entangled in fishing nets or traps and suffocating. For example, the only three observations we found from the 1970s in the press material were individuals caught as bycatch in fishing.

Our data, as just shown, make it possible to draw various interpretations regarding the occurrence of porpoises, their seasonal patterns, size differences, and the ways in which humans encountered porpoises. However, it is important to emphasise that interpreting historical data involves many challenges that anyone using such material should take into account.

Based on our data, we can, for instance, draw the conclusion that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, porpoises were encountered most frequently near larger population centres. However, this does not directly imply that these are the areas where the highest numbers of porpoises were found, because human encounters with marine animals are usually very random (e.g.

Latva 2023). For example, it may be that it was in the sea areas of these regions that more people were active and reported their encounters with porpoises to the press.

The data show that although porpoise records were particularly common between the 1880s and 1930s, the number of observations made cannot be taken, however, as an indication that porpoises were abundant in Finnish coastal waters during these decades. One reason for the increase in the number of observations from the 1880s onwards compared to previous decades is the huge increase in the number of newspapers and periodicals published in Finland from the end of the 19th century onwards (Salokangas and Tommila 1982). In the case of porpoise records, this means that the number of encounters with porpoises may well have been as high or even higher in the early 19th century and the centuries before. However, these encounters with porpoises did not have the same kind of publication platform in their own time as the press that grew up in Finland at the end of the 19th century and, in particular, the periodicals and journals focusing on natural history, hunting and fishing, that began to appear at that time (Salokangas and Tommila 1982).

Another point that requires caution concerns the measurements of animals or other organisms mentioned in historical newspapers and periodicals, because they may contain rough estimates and likely some exaggerations. For instance, Aino Jämsä writes (2025) that adders killed in a certain winter den in the 1930s were mentioned in newspapers to be as long as a meter, but when a researcher specialising in snakes examined the killed specimens, the longest one was only about 66 cm. Nevertheless, the measurements mentioned in our data correspond reasonably well to the average length of porpoises. They also provide an indicative result suggesting that a large proportion of the porpoises encountered in Finnish territorial waters were adult individuals.

The preceding examples are important points to take into account when using newspapers, journals and periodicals as research material to describe historical encounters with an animal. Of course, the use of press material, and digitalised press material for research purposes in the case of our study, also involves other factors

that affect the research results. When examining the results, we must consider the fact that we have found them using only three search terms: the Finnish words for porpoise, "pyöriäinen" and "merisika", and the Swedish word for porpoise, "tumlare", from a database digitised by the National Library of Finland. We could have probably found even more information of human encounters with porpoises if we had used more search terms. However, sorting through the hits obtained with just these three search terms was a very laborious process, especially considering that only about 1.4% of all the hits reported a record of porpoises.

The reason for the large number of irrelevant hits when searching for record data from digitised press material is that the Finnish and Swedish words for porpoise have many meanings. The search for porpoise records in Finnish was challenging, because the Finnish word for porpoise "pyöriäinen" is used in Finnish, for instance, as a surname. In contrast, the term "merisika" in Finnish also refers to the guinea pig (a borrowing ultimately from the German "Meerschwein", mediated through Swedish) and on some occasions even to the walrus. All three search terms are also the names of city quarters in Helsinki or Turku, because Finland adopted the Swedish custom of naming quarters with animal names in town planning at the beginning of the 19th century (Ollila and Toppari 1977). The search for porpoise records in Swedish-language press published in Finland was considerably more laborious than in Finnish, because the Swedish word for porpoise, "tumlare", is close to the verb "tumla", which means to roll or fall over. The total number of hits with the word "tumlar" in the press data was more than twenty thousand, which made it very laborious to divide into relevant and irrelevant results for our study. It was difficult to go through the Swedish-language material, but it was important because a significant number of Finnish newspapers and magazines were published in Swedish in the 19th and 20th centuries. There is also a large Swedish-speaking minority living in coastal Finland whose observations of porpoises are recorded only in Swedish-language periodicals. In any case, a large proportion of the observations had been reported using at least two of the terms,

so the dataset can be considered comprehensive when cross-read.

It should also be noted that although the material digitised by the National Library of Finland has been well digitised and machine-read using OCR technology, the quality of the machine reading is not one hundred per cent. For this reason, some mentions of the porpoise in the digitised press material may have been incorrectly machine-read and, thus, cannot be found through word searches. Additionally, the National Library of Finland has not yet digitised nearly all the newspapers, journals and periodicals published in Finland. All Swedish-language periodicals published in Finland were digitised by 2024, but Finnish-language newspapers, for instance, have been fully digitised only up to 1954 (Lilja 2025). Thus, possible OCR errors and the current state of digitisation certainly affect our results. On the other hand, the material we have examined is very extensive and, despite possible limitations, it provides a much more comprehensive overview of historical encounters with porpoises in the Finnish coastal region than was previously available. This is important for a better understanding of the changes not only in harbour porpoise populations in Finland but also in the entire Baltic Sea region.

Regarding the results, it is important to emphasise that biologists commented on our research and the dataset of porpoise records we collected. The inclusion of both disciplines as part of the research process has been extremely important. First, regarding the reading of the discovered material by historians, it was necessary to filter out, for example, fictional stories about porpoises from newspaper articles, because it has been the tradition in the press to publish various stories or truthful satires or parodies including animals such as porpoises intended to entertain readers (Latva 2023). The skills of historians specialising in media history and multi-species history were essential to sorting out such information. Equally important was the expertise of the biologists to identify those records that did not describe an encounter with a porpoise. For example, some of the porpoise records in our data mentioned the length of the animal as more than 5 metres. However, porpoises rarely grow to a length of 2 metres. Therefore, in these cases,

the record might be of another cetacean species or of another animal.

## Conclusions

This study provides new historical insights into the occurrence and decline of the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in the Baltic Sea in general and Finnish waters in particular. It also provides information on the seasonal variation in harbour porpoise sightings, on the variation in size and age of porpoises observed in Finnish waters, and describes what historical encounters between humans and harbour porpoises were like.

One of the research article's key findings is that the number of harbour porpoises in Finnish marine areas varied considerably by season, with sightings concentrated particularly in summer. Porpoises were observed throughout Finnish marine areas, from the Bothnian Bay to the southernmost regions. However, sightings in northern marine areas occurred mainly in summer, whereas they were also frequent in autumn and spring in southern areas. Only a few porpoise sightings were recorded in Finnish waters in winter. The article also notes that most of the porpoises observed in Finnish marine areas were adults. Historical encounters with harbour porpoises were not always just occasional sightings. Many porpoises ended up as bycatch in fisheries, and these marine mammals were also regularly killed when they were observed in Finnish marine areas. In addition to these findings, our research confirms the previous understanding that the number of porpoises declined dramatically in the coastal areas of Finland and throughout the Baltic Sea region in the mid-20th century. According to our research, this decline occurred in Finland as early as the 1940s.

In addition to different research results, our research brings almost three hundred new, previously uncollected records of porpoises in the coastal areas of Finland in the 19th and 20th centuries to the attention of the scientific community and the wider public. This dataset supports and refines existing knowledge regarding, for example, the distribution of porpoise populations. More importantly for historical research, it pro-

vides a substantial and previously unavailable dataset for examining human-porpoise relations, human attitudes toward porpoises, and the nature of human-animal encounters. These qualitative insights would not be possible without a comprehensive and systematically compiled dataset.

Our findings highlight how digitised press data and, more broadly, citizen science collected by people other than biologists can complement ecological monitoring and reveal long-term population trends that are otherwise poorly documented. The results also emphasise the need for interdisciplinary approaches that bridge history, ecology, and conservation studies. Reconstructing the cultural and environmental contexts of the harbour porpoise in the Baltic region contributes not only to biodiversity research but also to the broader understanding of human-marine relationships over time.

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*Supplementary Information:* The supplementary information related to this article is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.60910/ber2026.31fx-as25>

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