

CETACEAN ULTRASTRUCTURAL COCHLEAR IMAGING THROUGH SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPY

Maria Morell¹, Marc Lenoir², Jean-Luc Puel², Thierry Jauniaux³, Eduard Degollada¹, Michel André¹

(1) Laboratori d'Aplicacions Bioacústiques. Centre Tecnològic de Vilanova i la Geltrú. (UPC)

(2) Institut des Neurosciences de Montpellier. U583, Equipe 2: Physiopathologie et thérapies de l'oreille interne.

(3) Université de Liège

Abstract - The control of noise interaction between artificial and biological sources is essential to assess the development of sustainable marine technologies. Therefore, there is an emergent need to conduct morphological analysis of the acoustic pathways of marine organisms and detect possible structural alterations as a consequence of sound exposure. Cetaceans, because of their use of sounds in their daily activities, represent today the best bioindicators of the acoustic balance of the oceans. To access this information it is necessary to extract the ears of very fresh stranded individuals. One of the challenging steps after extraction and fixation of the samples is to decalcify the bone envelope to access the cochlea without damaging the soft tissues. A fast commercial decalcifier (RDO[®]) was used in 93 ears from 11 different odontocete species stranded in the Mediterranean Sea, the North Atlantic and the North Sea. Depending on the tympanic-periotic volume of the species, the decalcification time ranged from several hours to a few days, instead of taking few months with other decalcification agents, allowing a subsequently faster observation of the cochlear structures. Here we present images from cetacean cochlear ultrastructure through scanning electron microscopy. Following this protocol it is possible to obtain a fast diagnostic of possible acoustic trauma and relate the results to documented sound exposure. The output of this analysis will help calibrating theoretical results derived from deep-sea observatories.

Keywords - Decalcification, noise pollution, cochlea, ultrastructure, scanning electron microscopy

I. INTRODUCTION

While there is an increasing human pressure on the oceans, very little is known about the effect of underwater noise on marine organisms. Because of their vital dependence on acoustic information and their role in the food chain as top predator, the study of the effects of noise on cetaceans (Mammalia, Cetacea) has recently become ecologically essential [1]. Although some of these effects can be found in organs not directly related to the acoustic pathways [2], other lesions are expected to affect hearing, particularly the organ of Corti and its associated hair cells [3]. The problem relies in accessing fresh samples and in determining the relationship between a pathological change in the cochlea morphology and a possible sound exposure. Moreover, basic morphological and comparative descriptions of the cetacean ears are still lacking, probably because of the difficulty in obtaining suitable material, and a reliable protocol for analysis.

A detailed description of the cochlea morphology was presented for *Tursiops truncatus* [4, 5, 6] and studies of the basilar membrane and osseous spiral laminae in different odontocete species have been conducted to compare their hearing capabilities [7, 8, 9]. Despite of these early findings in a limited number of cetacean species, little data are available to comparatively describe inner ear structures. Stranding events may represent a unique opportunity to help building knowledge on cetacean hearing morphology and potential sensitivity when exposed to noise.

II. METHODOLOGY

Decalcification

Ninety three (93) ears from 11 different odontocete species that stranded in the Mediterranean Sea, Spanish North Atlantic and North Sea have been extracted. Specifically, the species processed were: *Phocoena phocoena* (n=48), *Stenella coeruleoalba* (n=13), *Stenella frontalis* (n=13), *Tursiops truncatus* (n=8), *Delphinus delphis* (n=2), *Kogia simus* (n=2), *Kogia breviceps* (n=2), *Globicephala macrorhynchus* (n=1), *Globicephala melas* (n=1), *Steno bredanensis* (n=2) and *Lagenodelphis hosei* (n=1).

After extraction, the samples were fixed with 10% buffered formaline or 2.5% glutaraldehyde and used subsequently to precisely determine the decalcification time with different concentrations of RDO[®]. RDO[®] is a rapid decalcifier based on hydrochloric acid (Apex Engineering Products Corporation, Aurora, Illinois, USA). Specifically we tried with 100% RDO[®], 80% RDO[®] (diluted with 80% ethanol), 75% RDO[®] (diluted with distilled water) and 50% RDO[®] (diluted with

distilled water and changing the media after 24h by or 50% RDO[®] or 25% RDO[®], also diluted with distilled water).

Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)

Twenty three very fresh ears from *Stenella coeruleoalba* (n=14), *Stenella frontalis* (n=4), *Tursiops truncatus* (n=1), *Delphinus delphis* (n=1), *Lagenodelphis hosei* (n=1), *Globicephala melas* (n=1), *Ziphius cavirostris* (n=1) have been processed for the observation through SEM using the facilities of CRIC (Montpellier) and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB).

III. RESULTS

Following a routine protocol with a specific dilution of RDO[®], the odontocete ear decalcification time ranged from several hours to a few days, depending on the tympanic-periotic volume of the species [10]

Some of the samples observed with SEM presented an advanced necrosis stage and it was not possible to identify the ultrastructure of the organ of Corti, but in the fresher samples we could identify the outer hair cells prints on the tectorial membrane.

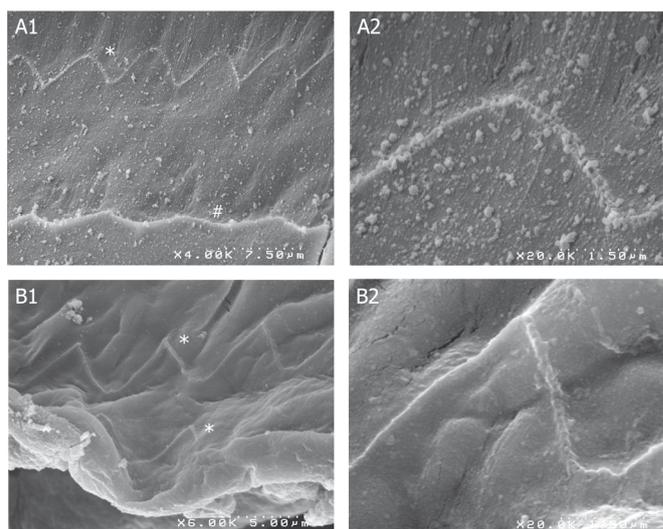


Fig. 1. SEM images of the tectorial membrane of a A) *Delphinus delphis* in 4.00k and 20.00k magnification and B) *Stenella coeruleoalba* in 6.00k and 20.00k magnification. In A1 and B1 are highlighted the position of the outer hair cells rows (*) and Hensen Stripe (#) while in A2 and B2 it is possible to observe the outer hair cells stereocillia prints

IV. DISCUSSION

Following this protocol it is possible to obtain a fast diagnostic of possible acoustic trauma and relate the results to documented sound exposure, although further studies should be done with fresher and better conserved and fixed ears. The preliminary results presented here represent a step forward in the inner ear ultrastructural morphology study. The output of this analysis will help calibrating theoretical results derived from deep-sea observatories.

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REAL TIME CLASSIFICATION OF SPERM WHALE CLICKS AND SHIPPING IMPULSES FROM FIXED OCEAN OBSERVATORIES.

Serge Zaugg, Mike van der Schaar, Ludwig Houégnigan, Michel André
 Laboratori d'Aplicacions Bioacústiques, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 08800 Vilanova i la Geltrú, Espanya.
www.lab.upc.es

Abstract - The automated acoustic detection of cetaceans in real time is an important tool to study their behaviour and distribution and for activating mitigation measures in the context of harmful anthropogenic activities at sea. Acoustic data from the NEMO ONDE deep sea observatory (Sicily) indicated that sperm whale clicks were present in 15 % of the recordings and impulsive ship noise in 10 %. The ship noise poses a serious challenge to the detection of sperm whale clicks, since it is an important source of false positives. As part of an integrated classification system, we present a classification module aimed at the automated and real time classification of impulses from sperm whales and shipping. The achieved classification performance indicates that it reliably separates a large proportion of sperm whale clicks from shipping impulses.

Keywords - Signal processing, bioacoustics, ocean observatories, shipping noise.

I. INTRODUCTION

The automated acoustic detection of cetaceans in real time is an important tool to study their behaviour and distribution in the field and for activating mitigation measures related to human activities that are potentially harmful to them. However the classification in a fully automated way is challenging due to the diversity of acoustic events and background noises. Acoustic data from the NEMO ONDE deep sea antenna (-2000 m) indicated that impulsive ship noise was present in 10 % of the recordings and sperm whale clicks in 15 %. The ship impulses pose a serious challenge to the detection of sperm whale clicks, since they often share similar time frequency properties and hence could be the cause of many false positive detections. As part of an integrated classification system, we present a classification module for the automated and real time classification of clicks from sperm whales and click-like sounds produced by shipping. The system also addresses the classification of other acoustic events (e.g. cetacean calls, ultrasonic cetacean clicks, tonal sounds from ships), which are not discussed here.

(right) Fig. 1. The predicted probability of being a Sperm Whale Click $p(\text{SWC})$ has been averaged for each segment and is plotted as diamonds (ISN) and circles (SWC). For illustration a possible decision threshold is drawn at $p = 0.6$.

II. METHODS

The data used to assess the module's accuracy consisted of 42 and 70 segments containing Impulsive Ship Noise (ISN) and Sperm Whale Clicks (SWC) respectively. These segments have been chosen manually from data recorded at the NEMO ONDE deep sea observatory between 6 and 20 of May 2005. The module is composed of two stages: The first stage, detects segments that contain mid frequency impulses and returns their location. The second stage only processes segments that contain a sufficient number of mid frequency impulses. It first extracts a set of features, which describe the temporal and spectral shape of each impulse. Then, it uses a feed forward neural network that returns, for each impulse, an estimated probability of being a Sperm Whale Click, $p(\text{SWC})$. In order to assess the classification accuracy, a cross validation was performed, where data from an entire day was left out for testing and the remaining data used to train the neural net.

