

# **Pseudostalked barnacles *Xenobalanus globicipitis* attached to killer whales *Orcinus orca* in South African waters**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Several records describe pseudostalked barnacles *Xenobalanus globicipitis* attached to killer whales *Orcinus orca*, yet little is known of this association in Southern African waters. Here we describe *Xenobalanus* prevalence on killer whales in South African waters and assemble previous records. Killer whales were photographed opportunistically between July and September 2013. Sex and age class were determined, and if *Xenobalanus* were present, attachment site and colony size noted. A prevalence of 50% was recorded, with barnacles most commonly observed on the dorsal fin and tail flukes. The high prevalence of *Xenobalanus* on killer whales in South African waters and lack thereof on killer whales at Marion Island implies that these are separate populations, and thus we suggest *Xenobalanus* prevalence is an additional means to distinguish between these populations.

**KEYWORDS:** *Xenobalanus globicipitis*, *Orcinus orca*, killer whale, barnacle, epibiont, South Africa

## **INTRODUCTION**

The pseudostalked barnacle *Xenobalanus globicipitis* (hereafter referred to as *Xenobalanus*) is a specialised epibiont, living only on cetaceans (Kane et al. 2008). This association is commensal as *Xenobalanus* does not

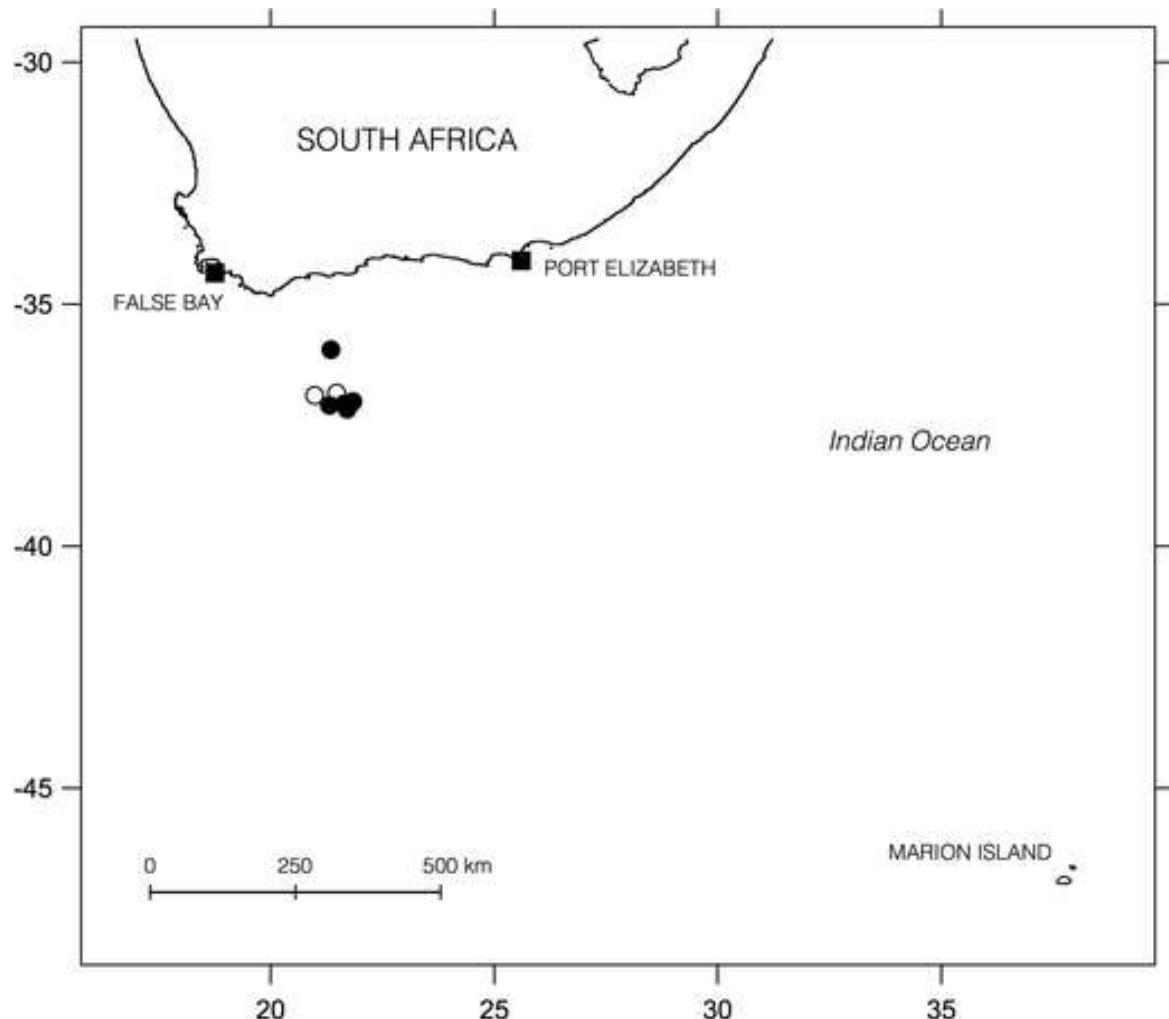
feed on its cetacean host, but simply benefits from being transported. *Xenobalanus* has a cosmopolitan distribution, ranging from the Arctic to Antarctica (Kane et al. 2008). The small diameter of its six-plated balanomorph shell enables it to pierce and securely embed itself into the integument of its host (Seilacher 2005). It is most commonly observed attached to the trailing edges of the host's dorsal fin, pectoral flippers or tail flukes (Kane et al. 2008), but in rare cases also attaches to the rostrum and area between the teeth (Samaras 1989). *Xenobalanus* has been documented on a wide range of cetaceans off the coast of South Africa (Rajaguru and Shantha 1992); however, there are few records of *Xenobalanus* associated with killer whales *Orcinus orca* (Best 2007). This association has been recorded in the Mediterranean (Gruvel 1920; Richard 1936), North Atlantic Ocean (Foote et al. 2011), eastern Pacific Ocean (Samaras 1989; Fertl 1996; Guerrero-Ruiz and Urban 2000; Kane et al. 2008) and western Pacific Ocean (Sakai et al. 2009). Here we describe the prevalence of *Xenobalanus globicipitis* attached to killer whales observed off the coast of South Africa from July to September 2013 and assemble previous records of this association in South African waters.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

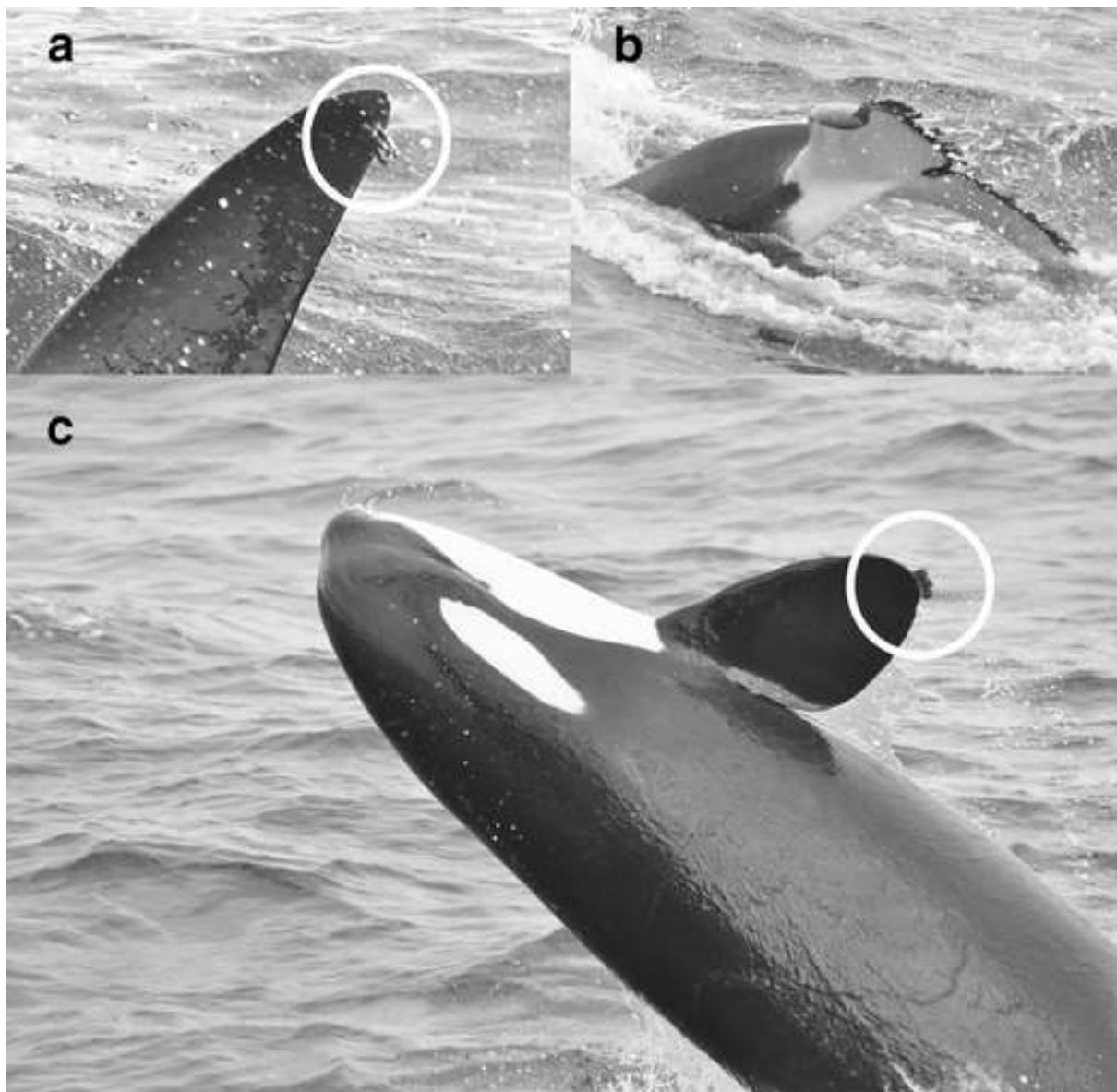
Killer whales were photographed opportunistically whilst conducting observations aboard a tuna longline fishing vessel off the South African coast from July to September 2013 (Fig. 1). Sex and age class (adult, sub-adult, calf) of killer whales were judged from size and shape of the dorsal fin, and overall body size and form. If barnacles were present, attachment site and minimum number of discernable barnacles (colony size) were noted. No specimens were collected; however, photographs were sufficient in identifying barnacles as *Xenobalanus globicipitis*. This monotypic species is distinguished from the similar-looking stalked barnacle *Conchoderma virgatum* by its narrower peduncle and darker colouration (Kane et al. 2008). Additionally, images collated from a photographic identification study of killer whales at Marion Island (Fig. 1) ongoing since 2006 (Reisinger et al. 2011; Reisinger and de Bruyn 2014) were also examined for the presence of *Xenobalanus*.

## RESULTS

Overall, 82 photographs of 16 individual killer whales (five adult males, seven adult females, one sub-adult male, one sub-adult female, and two unidentifiable) were taken. Eight individuals had infestations of *Xenobalanus* (50% prevalence); 3 adult females (37.5%), 2 adult males (25%), 1 sub-adult male (12.5%), 1 sub-



**Fig. 1 :** Locations of killer whales *Orcinus orca* observed with pseudostalked barnacles *Xenobalanus globicipitis* (filled circles) and without (empty circles) during July-September 2013. Squares denote locations of additional observations



**Fig. 2 :** Photographs of *Xenobalanus globicipitis* attached to the dorsal fin (a), tail flukes (b), and pectoral flipper (c) of killer whales *Orcinus orca* off the coast of South Africa (photo credits: DR Rollinson)

adult female (12.5%) and 1 unidentifiable (12.5%). Most killer whales were observed with infestations at a single site (75%), with only two individuals having infestations at two sites (25%). Infestations were most common on the tail flukes (40%) and dorsal fin (40%), with fewest on pectoral flippers (20%) (Fig. 2). Overall, mean colony size was  $7.1 \pm 5.8$  individuals (ranging from one to 20 individuals). Mean colony sizes on tail flukes, pectoral flippers and the dorsal fin were  $11.8 \pm 5.9$  ( $n = 4$ ),  $8 \pm 0$  ( $n = 2$ ) and  $2.0 \pm 0.8$  ( $n = 4$ ) individuals, respectively. At Marion Island, ~39,000 images of 57 identifiable killer whales were taken during 1,611 sightings of killer whales (Reisinger et al. 2011; Reisinger and de Bruyn 2014) and no infestations of *Xenobalanus* were observed.

## DISCUSSION

There are few records of *Xenobalanus* attached to killer whales in South African waters, yet this association seems to be common. The small number of records may reflect the scarcity of killer whale sightings in South African waters (Best 2010), observer bias, or that *Xenobalanus* simply goes unreported. We report a prevalence of 50 % among killer whales sighted off South Africa. Previous groups of killer whales sighted in False Bay and off Port Elizabeth (Fig. 1) contained at least 3 out of 12 (25%) and 1 out of 3 (33.3%) infested animals, respectively (David Hurwitz<sup>1</sup> pers. comm. and Lloyd Edwards<sup>2</sup> pers. comm.; Suppl. Figs. S1 and S2). The latter sighting was an adult male with *Xenobalanus* attached to the dorsal fin and tail flukes (Suppl. Fig. S2). Best (2007) noted that of eight killer whales examined in the South African subregion, *Xenobalanus* was attached to two (25 %); one individual had 30 attached to its tail flukes, while the other had seven on its tail flukes and 14 on its pectoral flippers. Records of *Xenobalanus* attached to killer whales in the eastern North Pacific indicate that this association is common, with 68 % of killer whales sighted from 1977 to 2003 possessing *Xenobalanus* (Kane et al. 2008).

While *Xenobalanus* is associated with many cetacean species and appears widespread, little is known about the mechanisms driving its occurrence (Toth et al. 2012). Early life history strategies of *Xenobalanus* have not been described and thus knowledge on the biology and ecology of this monotypic species has been inferred exclusively from observations of *Xenobalanus* on cetacean hosts. The presence of *Xenobalanus* in Arctic to

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Antarctic waters (Bushuev 1990; Kane et al. 2008; Olafsdottir and Shinn 2013) indicates that, as adults, the species has a wide thermal tolerance. However, given that water temperature is suggested as an important determinant of *Xenobalanus* prevalence (Van Waerebeek et al. 1993; Orams and Schuetze 1998) and that most sightings of *Xenobalanus* on cetaceans have been recorded in temperate and tropical seas (Rajaguru and Shantha 1992; Kane et al. 2008), this species may have optimal thermal preferences as adults and/or as larvae. Orams and Schuetze (1998) noted a seasonal decline in *Xenobalanus* infestations on bottlenose dolphins off Australia as water temperatures increased from 18 to 24 °C, suggesting an upper thermal tolerance threshold. Similarly, Van Waerebeek et al. (1993) noted that peak infestations of dusky dolphins off Peru occurred during periods of strongest upwelling, indicating the role of upwelling (and perhaps the associated cooler waters and increased nutrients) in controlling the swarming of nauplius larvae. Additionally, Kane et al. (2008) observed that *Xenobalanus* presence in the eastern Pacific Ocean was related to primary production, suggesting that low plankton abundance in oligotrophic areas may indirectly limit the presence of the filter-feeding *Xenobalanus* by influencing food availability. The waters immediately south of South Africa are highly productive, of moderate temperatures (~ 17.5 - 23.5 °C) (Rouault and Lutjeharms 2003), and function as vital swarming grounds for many planktonic larvae (Hutchings et al. 2002). It is possible that these waters, which support a large diversity of cetaceans (Best 2007), provide ideal habitat for *Xenobalanus* larvae to aggregate and settle.

Interestingly, there were no recorded occurrences of *Xenobalanus* among killer whales sighted at Marion Island – approximately 1,800 km south east of our sightings – despite this being well within the potential movement range of killer whales (Best et al. 2010; Matthews et al. 2011); a killer whale satellite tagged at Marion Island travelled to 35°S (RR Reisinger and PZN de Bruyn<sup>3</sup> unpubl. data). Mean annual sea surface temperature at Marion Island is 5°C (Mélice et al. 2003), much colder than where we made our observations (Fig. 1).

Commensal organisms are often used as biological tags to make inferences about host populations. Bushuev (1990) showed *Xenobalanus* prevalence was useful in distinguishing minke whale stocks during summer, reasoning that whales overwintered in distinct areas differing in their prevalence of *Xenobalanus* infestation. Similarly, *Xenobalanus* prevalence was among the factors Toth et al. (2012) used to delineate sympatric bottlenose dolphin stocks in the western Atlantic Ocean. The high prevalence of *Xenobalanus* infestations on killer whales observed in South African waters and the lack of infestations on killer whales sighted at Marion

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Island supports evidence that these are two separate populations, and thus the occurrence of *Xenobalanus* may provide researchers an additional means to distinguish between them.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors thank Lloyd Edwards of Raggy Charters and David Hurwitz of Simon's Town Boat Company for providing additional killer whale observations and two reviewers for their comments. Funding for killer whale work at Marion Island was provided by the National Research Foundation (NRF) Thuthuka programme, the South African Department of Science and Technology through the NRF, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund (project number: 10251290) and the International Whaling Commission's Southern Ocean Research Partnership. The Department of Environmental Affairs supplied logistic support within the South African National Antarctic Programme.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare they have no conflicting interests.

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**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**



**Fig. S1.** Photographs of *Xenobalanus globicipitis* attached to the dorsal fin of a killer whale *Orcinus orca* in False Bay, South Africa (photo credits: D Hurwitz).



**Fig. S2.** Photograph of *Xenobalanus globicipitis* attached to the tail flukes of a killer whale *Orcinus orca* off the coast of Port Elizabeth, South Africa (photo credit: L Edwards).