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Maevatiana Ratsimbazafindranahaka, Emilienne Razafimahatratra, Robin Mathevet, Olivier Adam, Chloé Huetz, Isabelle Charrier, Anjara T. Saloma

### ► To cite this version:

Maevatiana Ratsimbazafindranahaka, Emilienne Razafimahatratra, Robin Mathevet, Olivier Adam, Chloé Huetz, et al.. Morphometric study of humpback whale mother-calf pairs in the Sainte Marie channel, Madagascar, using a simple drone-based photogrammetric method. *Western Indian Ocean Journal of Marine Science*, 2022, 20 (2), pp.95-107. 10.4314/wiojms.v20i2.8 . hal-03618470

**HAL Id: hal-03618470**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03618470>**

Submitted on 21 Oct 2022

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1 **Morphometric study of humpback whale mother-calf pairs in the Sainte Marie**  
2 **channel, Madagascar, using a simple drone-based photogrammetric method**

3 Maevatiana Nokoloina Ratsimbazafindranahaka<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Emilienne Razafimahatratra<sup>1</sup>, Robin  
4 Mathevet<sup>4</sup>, Olivier Adam<sup>2,5</sup>, Chloé Huetz<sup>2</sup>, Isabelle Charrier<sup>2</sup>, Anjara Saloma<sup>3</sup>

5 <sup>1</sup>Département de Zoologie et Biodiversité Animale, Université d'Antananarivo, Antananarivo,  
6 Madagascar

7 <sup>2</sup>Institut des Neurosciences Paris-Saclay, Université Paris-Saclay, CNRS, Saclay, France

8 <sup>3</sup>Association Cétamada, Barachois Sainte Marie, Madagascar

9 <sup>4</sup>ICU SAS, Yerres, France

10 <sup>5</sup>Institut Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, Sorbonne Université, Paris, France

11 **Corresponding author**

12 Maevatiana Nokoloina Ratsimbazafindranahaka,

13 [maevatiana.ratsimbazafindranahaka@universite-paris-saclay.fr](mailto:maevatiana.ratsimbazafindranahaka@universite-paris-saclay.fr)

14           **Abstract**

15   Morphometric studies of humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) occurring in the Indian  
16   Ocean area have been limited by the technology currently available. In the Sainte Marie  
17   channel, Madagascar, we tested a straightforward aerial single-camera photogrammetry on  
18   mother-calf pairs that combines standard Unoccupied Aerial Vehicle (UAV) with free, easy-  
19   to-access, and user-friendly software. Our goals were to estimate mothers' and calves' body  
20   measurements and to investigate the effect of maternal parity (primiparous versus  
21   multiparous, based on length) on calf's size. We estimated a mean length of  $12.4 \pm 1.2$  m for  
22   mothers ( $N = 16$ ) and  $5 \pm 0.9$  m for calves ( $N = 16$ ). We found that calves' size did not depend  
23   significantly on maternal parity. The photogrammetry method we used was simple and cost-  
24   effective, yet produced convincing morphometric measurements with acceptable precision  
25   and accuracy. The coefficients of variation (CVs) of repeated estimates and the level of error  
26   were relatively low (CV = 2.31% for a known-sized object and average CV = 2.52% for  
27   individual whales; average error = 1.8% for a known-sized object). We believe our results will  
28   encourage more teams to study the morphometry of large marine mammals despite  
29   limitations in terms of resources.

30   **Keywords:** Aerial photogrammetry; Breeding grounds; Parity; Unoccupied Aerial Vehicle  
31   (UAV)

32

## 33 INTRODUCTION

34 Morphometric data is the numerical expression of an animal's morphological characteristics  
35 that can be used to address various biological questions (Schmidt-Nielsen and Knut, 1984).  
36 Previous studies have demonstrated the efficiency of using body length for determining  
37 growth rate, age-structures, and population demographics in cetaceans (Chittleborough,  
38 1965; Perryman and Lynn, 1993). At the individual level, morphometric data can be  
39 examined to assess body condition and reproductive capacity (Perryman and Lynn, 2002;  
40 Miller *et al.*, 2012; Christiansen *et al.*, 2016; Fearnbach *et al.*, 2018). In addition, a time  
41 series of morphometric data can be used to assess population responses to environmental  
42 and anthropogenic changes (Hanks, 1981). For example, long-term changes in size  
43 distribution can provide a signal of overexploitation of a population (Stevens *et al.*, 2000).

44 Live capture-release schemes are generally not applicable to large whales due to their size.  
45 Hence in the past, morphometric studies of large whales relied mainly on direct  
46 measurements on stranded or commercially harvested specimens (e.g., Chittleborough,  
47 1955, 1958, 1965; Omura, 1955; Nishiwaki, 1959, 1962). Later, the development of  
48 photogrammetry for studying whales allowed for the extension of morphometric studies to  
49 live animals. Known as the science of measuring objects using photographs,  
50 photogrammetry is better than direct measurements as it does not require physical capture of  
51 animals and is thus non-invasive and less opportunistic. Photogrammetry used in whale  
52 studies can be divided into two main approaches: either stereo-photogrammetry or single-  
53 camera photogrammetry. Stereo-photogrammetry uses overlapping photographs to estimate  
54 length (Cubbage and Calambokidis, 1987; Dawson *et al.*, 1995). It allows for accurate  
55 measurements of whales since the measurements are done in 3-dimensions. However, it  
56 requires a complex pre-configuration such as a precise and controlled stereo-camera  
57 mounting and synchronization. On the other hand, single-camera photogrammetry requires  
58 only a single photograph and uses either a known-size object in the frame for scale  
59 (Christiansen *et al.*, 2016) or a measurement of the range to the individual (Best and R  ther,

60 1992; Perryman and Lynn, 2002; Jaquet, 2006; Fearnbach *et al.*, 2011; Miller *et al.*, 2012;  
61 Durban *et al.*, 2015; Dawson *et al.*, 2017; Christiansen *et al.*, 2018; Burnett *et al.*, 2019). To  
62 achieve accurate measurements from single-photographs while optimizing the cost, a variety  
63 of combinations of tools, detailed in Table 1, has been used in the field. One of the most  
64 notable advances is the use of Unoccupied Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or small aerial drones to  
65 perform aerial photogrammetry.

66 UAVs have facilitated an array of methods for monitoring wildlife and studying spatial  
67 ecology. They provide an ideal solution if the studied animals are scared by the presence of  
68 humans in the area or if the animals are dangerous for human observers (Linchant *et al.*,  
69 2015). UAVs allow researchers to observe animals in their environment from above, are less  
70 invasive than Occupied Aircrafts (OA), and are significantly much more cost-effective. UAVs  
71 have therefore been used for a number of marine mammal research applications (Goebel *et al.*  
72 *et al.*, 2015; Fiori *et al.*, 2017), including measuring individual animals (Christiansen *et al.*, 2016,  
73 2018; Durban *et al.*, 2016; Dawson *et al.*, 2017; Burnett *et al.*, 2019).

74 The models of UAVs commonly used in aerial photogrammetry of whales vary from standard  
75 UAVs, such as DJI Phantom 3, to the more expensive UAVs specifically designed for  
76 scientific research and/or above-water operations. To obtain an approximation of the range  
77 between the camera on the UAV and the whale, researchers generally rely on an altimeter,  
78 i.e., an altitude measurements tool (as mentioned in Table 1). The altimeter can be a  
79 barometric one (Durban *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Burnett *et al.*, 2019) or an external customized  
80 tool such as Light Detection and Ranging technology or LIDAR (Dawson *et al.*, 2017;  
81 Christiansen *et al.*, 2018). LIDAR can provide very accurate and precise altitude  
82 measurements (Dawson *et al.*, 2017). However, the deployment of LIDAR on an UAV can  
83 incur additional cost. Therefore, although barometric altimeters are less accurate and less  
84 precise than LIDAR, they are still suitably reliable for photogrammetric purposes and are  
85 commonly integrated into most UAVs (Durban *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Burnett *et al.*, 2019). It  
86 should be noted that since the lens of the UAVs camera often distorts the images, some

87 photogrammetric studies incorporate prior image correction to improve photo accuracy  
88 during the image processing step (Dawson *et al.*, 2017; Burnett *et al.*, 2019). Alternatively,  
89 other studies follow a set of specific framing rules in order to minimize the distortion effects  
90 on the image (Durban *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Christiansen *et al.*, 2016, 2018).

91 The logistical challenges in utilizing advanced research tools for studying whales may offer  
92 an explanation as to why comprehensive surveys on humpback whale morphometry in some  
93 regions is lacking. Adding elements to an existing UAV or designing a new UAV can be for  
94 example a complex task for teams lacking of Research & Development or electronics  
95 department. In this paper, we establish and validate the performance of a simple and cost-  
96 efficient single-camera photogrammetry approach that combines a standard UAV (here a DJI  
97 Phantom 4) with open-source software to target mother-calf pairs from the Sainte Marie  
98 channel, Madagascar.

99 Humpback whales are a highly migratory species. They spend the majority of the summer in  
100 their mid- or high-latitude feeding grounds. In winter, they breed and give birth in warm  
101 tropical waters (Clapham, 2018). The Sainte Marie channel, located at the eastern coast of  
102 Madagascar, is part of the humpback whale's breeding grounds in the South Western Indian  
103 Ocean. It is an important breeding ground in terms of mother-calf pairs presence as the  
104 channel is relatively calm and shallow (Trudelle *et al.*, 2018). Humpback whales arrive here  
105 between June and September.

106 Female humpback whales start to calve between 5 to 9-years old (Clapham, 1992; Gabriele  
107 *et al.*, 2007) where they give birth to a single calf, approximately every 2 years (Clapham,  
108 2018). Humpback whale mothers are left with the responsibility of the survival of their young  
109 until the calf reach the age of approximately 1-year old (Clapham, 2018). The size of sexually  
110 mature females ranges between 11 m to 15 m (Omura, 1955; Nishiwaki, 1959, 1962).  
111 Christiansen *et al.* (2016) reported a mean length of 12 m for females accompanied by a calf  
112 off of Australia. A similar measurement has been reported by Spitz *et al.* (2000) in Hawaii.

113 The calves' mean length is about 4.2 m at birth (Chittleborough, 1965) and they have a  
114 growth rate of approximately 3 cm per day (Christiansen *et al.*, 2016).

115 In pinnipeds (Bowen, 2009) and some large whale species (Laws, 1961; Gambell, 1972;  
116 Best and R  ther, 1992), it has been found that primiparous mothers (females having their  
117 first young and thus inexperienced mothers) tend to produce smaller offspring compared to  
118 multiparous mothers (mothers that have previously calved and thus more experienced). This  
119 trend may be related to numerous factors, such as a physiological change in the mother  
120 following her first parturition that favours the development of future foetuses, a more  
121 favourable external environment for the mother, or a behavioural change in the mother  
122 gained through previous experiences (Ellis *et al.*, 2000). Female investment in offspring size  
123 can be considered as a form of maternal contribution to the survival of the offspring since  
124 larger offspring are known to have higher chances of survival in mammals (Ronget *et al.*,  
125 2018). In humpback whales, the effect of the maternal parity on offspring size has not yet  
126 been investigated. Therefore, our goals were to: 1) estimate mother's and calf's body  
127 measurements (standard length and maximum width), and 2) test whether the calf's size is  
128 related to the parity of its mother (primiparous or multiparous).

## 129 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### 130 ***Study site***

131 Field studies were conducted in the Sainte Marie channel, in Madagascar (Indian Ocean).  
132 About 60 km long and 7 to 30 km wide (Trudelle *et al.*, 2018), the channel is located between  
133 Sainte Marie Island (between latitudes 17° 19' and 16° 42' South, and longitudes 49° 48' and  
134 50° 01' East) and the East coast of Madagascar's mainland. The data collection, conducted  
135 in conjunction with ongoing study on humpback whale mother-calf interactions, were  
136 completed between August to September 2018 under the national research permits #28/18  
137 MRHP/SG/DGRHP.

### 138 ***UAV platform***

139 The DJI Phantom 4 UAV is a quadcopter weighting 1380 g, with a diameter of 350 mm. It is  
140 equipped with a built-in barometer that provides real-time altitude measurements (in m), and  
141 a gimbaled camera with a 3.61-mm focal length, infinite focus and 0.0015-mm pixel size.  
142 Within a centred radius equivalent to 60% of the video frame height, the distortion-related  
143 displacement on an image from the camera is less than five pixels (Burnett *et al.*, 2019),  
144 which is low. In our study, the video resolution was set at 4096×2160-pixels (4K) with a  
145 framerate of 24 frames per seconds.

#### 146 ***Whale visual searches protocol***

147 All methods and approaches were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and  
148 regulations in force in Madagascar. Dedicated visual searches for humpback whale mother-  
149 calf pairs were conducted from a 6.40 m rigid motor boat during days with moderate weather  
150 conditions (Beaufort scale  $\leq 3$ , corresponding to gentle breeze, wind speed less than 12 km  
151  $h^{-1}$ , and wave height not exceeding 0.5 m) between 0630 and 1730 hours. The crew  
152 consisted of at least 3 trained observers (one on an elevated platform at the back of the boat  
153 and two covering the lateral view) and 1 or 2 experimented drone pilots. When a mother-calf  
154 pair was spotted, it was approached at idle speed to a distance between 100 and 200 m. All  
155 mother-calf pairs were photo-identified to ensure that there is no double-sampling during the  
156 study period. The ventral face of the tail fluke (visible when the whale is about to dive) and/or  
157 the dorsal fin of each individual was/were photographed using a Nikon digital camera (model  
158 D5600) fitted with a 50-300 mm lens. The photographs obtained within the season were then  
159 manually compared in order to check that indeed no double-sampling of mother-calf pairs  
160 occurred. Depending on the degree of dorsal furl, we also estimated the relative age of each  
161 calf (neonate versus non-neonate, Cartwright and Sullivan, 2009; Faria *et al.*, 2013, Saloma,  
162 2018). All sighting data were integrated into the local dataset ceta.net (managed by  
163 Cétamada association) that gathers all marine mammals' sighting information recorded in  
164 Madagascar since 2009.



165 ***UAV flight protocol for whale images acquisition***

166 The UAV was deployed from the boat to video-record the spotted mother-calf pair vertically  
167 overhead from an altitude around 15 m to 60 m, at a vertical speed of approximately 0.5 m s<sup>-1</sup>.  
168 <sup>1</sup>. Sometimes the mother and the calf were not close to each other or were not at the surface  
169 at the same time. In these cases, they were filmed separately. The drone initialization  
170 (altitude zeroing) was performed before each flight on an on-boat platform 0.6 m above the  
171 sea level (the variation of the on-boat load between outings was fairly low and assumed to  
172 not have a very significant effect on this zeroing height). A maximum of two flight sessions  
173 was conducted for each pair (10-15 min duration per flight). Photographs were extracted  
174 afterward from the video recordings (see Images extraction and digitization).

175 ***Calibration images acquisition***

176 To estimate the whales' dimension from photographs in the absence of known size scale  
177 markers in the frames and to account for systematic error in ranging, the camera needed to  
178 be calibrated. This can be done using images of an object with a known length taken at  
179 various distances between the object and the camera, i.e., ranges (Jaquet, 2006; Burnett *et*  
180 *al.*, 2019). To perform calibration in this study, a static floating kayak of 2.75 m in length was  
181 video-recorded vertically overhead at altitudes between 5 m to 45 m at the end of the study  
182 period. In addition, for testing, a supplementary filming flight was performed to acquire video  
183 material that is independent to the one dedicated to the calibration. The equipment, settings  
184 used, and weather conditions present during calibration were consistent with the whale  
185 survey flights.

186 ***Images extraction and digitization***

187 Our photogrammetric method was based on 4096×2160-pixel photographs (no cropping)  
188 extracted from the collected nadir pointing video using the frame capture function in GOM  
189 Player v2.3.32.5292 (GOM & Company, [www.gomlab.com](http://www.gomlab.com)). Video recordings were viewed  
190 frame by frame for the process. For each filmed individual, one photograph which was the

191 highest quality was extracted. A high quality photograph is one which includes the whale  
192 laying flat at the surface, dorsal side facing up, emerged as much as possible, static or  
193 travelling at relatively slow speed, with contour not masked by chops, and with a non-arching  
194 body axis and peduncle (Figure 1a). As our unadjusted lens is likely to distort images around  
195 the outside of the frame, a suitable high quality photograph was selected if the subject was  
196 positioned within the 60% radius in the middle of the frame (see lens description in UAV  
197 platform). For each photograph, the standard length and the maximum width of the whale  
198 were measured in pixels using the software Inkscape v0.92 ([www.inkscape.org](http://www.inkscape.org)) (Figure 1b).

199 With respect to the kayak video dedicated to calibration, eight photographs were extracted at  
200 approximately 5 m altitude intervals (reference photographs). Only photos with clear, centred  
201 frames containing the entire kayak were selected. Additionally, from the supplementary  
202 independent kayak video, several photographs (tests hereafter) were taken at an altitude  
203 ranging from 5 to 45 m. The length of the kayak in all photographs was then measured in  
204 pixels.

### 205 ***Calibration process***

206 For each of the reference photographs, the measured length from the photographs (in pixels)  
207 and the real length of the kayak (in m) were used to calculate the corresponding scale (in m  
208 pixel<sup>-1</sup>):

$$209 \text{ SCALE} = \text{REAL LENGTH} / \text{LENGTH IN PIXELS} \quad (1)$$

210 Then, the scale was regressed against the altitude at which the reference photographs were  
211 taken (Figure 2):

$$212 \text{ SCALE} = 0.0004197 \times \text{ALTITUDE} + 0.0001814 \quad (2)$$

213 From (2), we then derived a formula with which we could estimate metric length from vertical  
214 images taken at known altitudes:

215 ESTIMATED LENGTH = SCALE × NUMBER OF PIXELS (3)

216 ***Barometric altimeter's accuracy evaluation***

217 The UAV model used did not have a suitable alternate altitude measurement for comparison.

218 Therefore, we assessed the accuracy of the barometric altimeter directly using the optical

219 properties of the camera. All of the test photographs were used to back-calculate the

220 expected distance between the camera and the object (in m) as done by Krause *et al.*

221 (2017):

222 Expected camera-object distance = (Real length × Focal length) / (Number of pixels × Pixel

223 size) (4)

224 We then compared that with the barometric altitude reading while accounting for the zeroing

225 height. To assess if the accuracy of the barometric altimeter varies with the expected altitude

226 (expected camera-object distance minus zeroing height), we performed a Spearman's

227 correlation test using the R statistical software v4.0.3 (R core team, [www.R-project.org](http://www.R-project.org)).

228 ***Measurements accuracy evaluation***

229 We were unable to directly address the accuracy of our measures as it was impractical to

230 include a scale object with a known size in each photograph of whale. However, as a proxy,

231 we evaluated our measurement error based on our test photographs. From each photograph,

232 the length of the kayak was estimated and the measurement error was then calculated as the

233 percent difference as follows (Krause *et al.*, 2017):

234 % ERROR = | 1 - (REAL LENGTH / ESTIMATED LENGTH) × 100 | (4)

235 To investigate whether the error varies with the altitude at which the photographs were taken,

236 we used a Spearman's correlation test and a Kruskal-Wallis test (using three altitude

237 classes: 5 to 15 m, 15 to 25 m and > 25 m) in R.

238 ***Measurements precision evaluation***

239 To indirectly assess the precision of our approach, we calculated the coefficient of variation  
240 (CV) of the length estimations of our test object. Additionally, to address whether different  
241 observers consistently derive similar measurements, four independent experimented  
242 observers estimated the length of the test object. The results were compared among  
243 observers using Kruskal-Wallis test in R.

#### 244 **Whale data analysis**

245 The numbers of pixels of the whales were related to the estimated dimension in meter using  
246 the formula (2) and (3). Based on the estimated length and considering the life history of the  
247 humpback whale (Omura, 1955; Nishiwaki, 1959, 1962; Chittleborough, 1965; Clapham,  
248 1992; Gabriele *et al.*, 2007; Clapham, 2018), we then sorted mothers into two categories:  
249 primiparous, i.e. likely accompanied by their first calf, for mothers  $< 13$  m, and multiparous,  
250 likely already had previously one or more calves, for mothers  $\geq 13$  m. To assess if the body  
251 lengths of calves differ between the two parity categories of mothers, we performed a  
252 Wilcoxon test in R.

253 Age has previously been used to categorize females as primiparous or multiparous when  
254 complete birth records for each individual were not available (Ellis *et al.*, 2000). Such  
255 approach is possible when the life history of the species is known. As mentioned previously,  
256 the age at which female humpback whales have their first calf is between 5-9-years old  
257 (Clapham, 1992; Gabriele *et al.*, 2007) and the birth interval is about 2 years (Clapham,  
258 2018). Based on these data, we can assume that females  $< 9$ -years old whom are  
259 accompanied by a calf are likely to be primiparous mothers, while those that are  $\geq 9$  years  
260 old can be assumed to be multiparous. At age 9, a female humpback whale should reach 13  
261 m (Chittleborough, 1965) and incidentally, this value is consistent with data obtained by  
262 whaling operations (i.e., data from direct measurements): the average size of sexually  
263 mature female humpback whales is of 13 m (Omura, 1955; Nishiwaki, 1959, 1962).  
264 Therefore, we set 13 m as the threshold to define parity.

265 In some instances, it was possible to extract more than one suitable, high quality  
266 photographs of individual whales. Therefore, for these whales, we were able to make  
267 additional length estimations. We thus calculated the CVs on individual whales as well, to  
268 obtain a more direct precision assessment.

## 269 **RESULTS**

270 Using a DJI Phantom 4, we photographed a total of sixteen mother-calf pairs between  
271 August and September 2018. All calves had an unfurled dorsal fin, indicating that they were  
272 not neonates (yet aged less than 3 months). All photographs were obtained at an altitude  
273 ranging between 17 and 60 m (mean =  $27 \pm 11$  m); the majority (29 out of 32) being obtained  
274 at an altitude < 45 m. The empirical calibration formulas (2) and (3) allowed us to estimate  
275 the standard length and the maximum width of mothers and calves from these photographs.

### 276 ***Accuracy of the barometric altimeter***

277 The absolute difference between the altitude reading provided by the barometric altimeter of  
278 the UAV and the expected altitude (expected camera-object distance minus zeroing height)  
279 was low (mean =  $0.3 \pm 0.3$  m, min = 0 m, max = 1.3 m,  $N = 29$ ; Figure 4). Furthermore, the  
280 correlation between this difference and the barometric altitude was low and not statistically  
281 significant (Spearman's correlation test;  $\rho = 0.354$ ,  $S = 2624$  and  $p = 0.06$ ).

### 282 ***Accuracy of the method on object with a known size***

283 The results of repetitive estimations of the length of an object with a known size, a 2.75-m  
284 test kayak, at an altitude between 5.8 and 40.9 m showed an average error of  $1.8 \pm 1.41\%$   
285 with respect to the real length (min = 0%, max = 4.56%,  $N = 29$ ). The errors showed no  
286 statistically significant variation with respect to altitude (Spearman's correlation test;  $\rho = -$   
287 0.16,  $S = 4711$  and  $p = 0.406$ ; Kruskal-Wallis test;  $\chi^2 = 1.664$ ,  $df = 2$  and  $p = 0.435$ ; Figure 5).

### 288 ***Precision of the method on object with a known size***

289 The repeated estimations of the length of an object with a known size showed a CV of  
290 2.31%. No statistically significant differences were detected for the estimated length of the  
291 object among four independent observers (Kruskal-Wallis test;  $\chi^2 = 0.511$ ,  $df = 3$  and  
292  $p = 0.916$ ; Figure 6).

### 293 ***Morphometric measurements of whales***

294 All estimations are presented in Table 1. The mothers showed a mean body length of  
295  $12.4 \pm 1.2$  m (min = 10.2 m, max = 14.7 m,  $N = 16$ ). Their average maximum width was  
296  $2.8 \pm 0.4$  m (min = 2.1 m, max = 3.6 m,  $N = 16$ ). The calves presented a mean body length of  
297  $5 \pm 0.9$  m (min = 3.6 m, max = 7.2 m,  $N = 16$ ) and a mean maximum width of  $1 \pm 0.2$  m  
298 (min = 0.7 m, max = 1.5 m,  $N = 16$ ).

### 299 ***Relation between calves' size and parity***

300 The majority of the mothers (11 out of 16) were < 13 m in length and were classified into the  
301 primiparous category. The remaining 5 individuals were classified as multiparous mothers ( $\geq$   
302 13 m in length). The length of calves from primiparous mothers was smaller than those from  
303 multiparous ones on average (Figure 3). However, there was no statistically significant  
304 difference (Wilcoxon test;  $W = 43$  and  $p = 0.084$ ).

### 305 ***Precision of the whale measurements***

306 For most individual whales ( $N = 24$ ), we were able to extract supplementary photographs at  
307 different altitudes. Including the initial whale photographs, we obtained two length  
308 estimations for 23 individuals and three for one individual. With these estimations, we found  
309 an average CV of  $2.52 \pm 1.65\%$  (min = 0.02%, max = 5%).

## 310 **DISCUSSION**

311 The photogrammetric approach we used relied on a formula which was based on several  
312 vertical-aerial photographs of a reference object with a known size (a 2.75-m kayak) placed  
313 on the sea surface. This empirical formula allowed us to assess morphometric data of both

314 humpback whale mothers and their calves using nadir pointing aerial photographs taken at a  
315 known altitude. In our method, errors are likely due to 1) the distortion of the lens, 2) the  
316 human error in the digitization process 3) the accuracy of the UAV's barometric altimeter,  
317 and 4) the whales' body flex and varying submersion level. To minimise lens distortion, we  
318 centred all the images, with the targeted object avoiding the outer frames. With our framing,  
319 the pixel displacement normally does not exceed 5 pixels (Burnett *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the  
320 associated error is likely to be relatively small. Also, the contribution of human error is likely  
321 to be negligible, as we found that independent observers systematically derived similar  
322 estimations.

323 With the assumption that local environmental barometric pressure is relatively uniform within  
324 and between individual flights in a given site (Burnett *et al.*, 2019), our tests suggest that the  
325 measurements obtained with our method are relatively precise and accurate. Although higher  
326 than those reported by Dawson *et al.* (2017) and by Durban *et al.* (2015, 2016), the CVs of  
327 repeated estimates (2.31% for an object with a known size and 2.52% on average for  
328 individual whales) and the level of error (1.8% on average, as calculated using an object with  
329 a known size) did not differ greatly from those reported in Christiansen *et al.* (2016) and in  
330 Burnett *et al.* (2019).

331 Regarding the barometric altimeter of our drone, the altitude it provided, used as a proxy for  
332 range, was accurate to within 1.3 m. Compared to LIDAR altimeter like the one used by  
333 Dawson *et al.* (2017) which is accurate to < 0.06 m, the barometric altimeter of our drone  
334 was less accurate, which in turn, likely contributed greatly to the estimated errors and  
335 variation over repeated measurements.

336 With respect to the contribution of the body flex and varying body submersion of free-ranging  
337 whales, precise quantification is difficult as the true size of each individual is not known in  
338 advance for comparison. The dorso-ventral flexing of the body may result in underestimation  
339 of length if the method is based on nadir-pointing images (Cubbage and Calambokidis, 1987;

340 Dawson *et al.*, 1995). Body submersion may also contribute to additional underestimation  
341 and variation because we used the altitude as a proxy for range (camera-object distance). As  
342 whales are always partially submerged (at least), the range is always slightly greater when  
343 photographing a whale than when photographing a kayak from the same altitude. Also,  
344 because the degree of submersion may vary slightly amongst photographs and individuals,  
345 there could be additional ranging imprecision which was not taken into account during this  
346 study. Incidentally, this may partially explain why the CV of repeated estimates is greater for  
347 whales than for our test kayak. Further studies involving at the same time our method and  
348 other alternatives that can take into account the whales' body flex and body submersion  
349 (e.g., stereo-photogrammetry, Cabbage and Calambokidis, 1987; Dawson *et al.*, 1995) would  
350 allow the quantification of these errors and are thus encouraged. In all cases, in our method  
351 we ensured that only photographs of the whale laying flat at the surface, emerged as much  
352 as possible from the water, and with straight body axis and caudal peduncle were used. We  
353 are thus confident that these whale related issues were minimized.

354 The estimated standard lengths of the mothers were consistent with those obtained from  
355 underwater images by Spitz *et al.* (2000) in Hawaii and from aerial vertical photographs by  
356 Christiansen *et al.* (2016) off of Australia. Using a threshold that we defined according to the  
357 known life history of humpback whales, we categorized the mothers as primiparous (< 13-m  
358 mothers) or multiparous ( $\geq$  13-m mothers). The calves produced by mothers categorized as  
359 multiparous seemed larger than those produced by mothers categorized as primiparous. It  
360 has been reported that novice (primiparous) females generally produce smaller offspring  
361 (Clutton-Brock, 1991), while multiparous females are capable of producing larger offspring,  
362 as they are physically and physiologically more mature than primiparous females (Ellis *et al.*,  
363 2000). For both fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) and sperm whales (*Physeter*  
364 *macrocephalus*), it has been documented that the offspring of primiparous females are  
365 smaller than those of multiparous females examined at the same time (Laws, 1961; Gambell,  
366 1972). For right whales (*Eubalaena australis*), calves from primiparous females have a



367 smaller mean length than calves from older females (Best and R  ther, 1992). In our study,  
368 the difference in size between calves from multiparous mothers and primiparous mothers  
369 was however not statistically significant. It should be considered that our study was  
370 conducted at the end of the breeding season, and all calves we observed had an unfurled  
371 dorsal fin and were longer on average compared to the mean length at birth (4.3 m;  
372 Chittleborough, 1965). This means that the calves have already grown significantly since  
373 birth. The difference in size, while likely evident and fragrant at birth, is likely less evident  
374 with time as calves may grow throughout the season at different rates depending on various  
375 external factors, as seen in pinnipeds (Bowen, 2009). Milk intake by humpback whale calves  
376 and the milk production from each mother may for example differ amongst mother-offspring  
377 pairs, meaning the postnatal growth rate may vary. Although our sample size was relatively  
378 small, our results provide a first assessment of the morphometry of the South Western Indian  
379 Ocean's female humpback whales and their calf.

380 In conclusion, we were able to estimate the body measurements of humpback whale mother-  
381 calf pairs and to investigate the effect of maternal parity on calf's size using a relatively  
382 straightforward photogrammetric method that combined a standard UAV and free, easy-to-  
383 access and user-friendly software. Our method was not as precise and as accurate as  
384 methods involving more advanced equipment and tools such as drone equipped with acute  
385 altimeter (Durban *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Dawson *et al.*, 2017) and paid software (Dawson *et al.*,  
386 2017; Burnett *et al.*, 2019). However, we demonstrated that our methods produce convincing  
387 morphometric measurements with both satisfactory precision and accuracy. While the level  
388 of error limits the suitability of this method for comparing individuals, our methods still have  
389 potential applications to study the global morphometric trend of a population. Our methods  
390 can be further adapted for studying population structures or for investigating population  
391 responses to changing environment as has been done previously (Chittleborough, 1958;  
392 Hanks, 1981; Stevens *et al.*, 2000; Perryman and Lynn, 2002). We hope that this study will  
393 encourage more teams to study the morphometry of large marine mammals despite

394 limitations in terms of resources. Such studies would especially help in conservation  
395 decision-making as it may help identifying environmental issues.

#### 396 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

397 We would like to warmly thank Aina F. Ramanampamonjy, Isobel Morgan, Mandrindra O.  
398 Rakotovao, Mathilde Martin, and Schédir Marchesseau who contributed to the data  
399 collection. We also thank Isobel Morgan for improving the use of English in the present  
400 manuscript. This work was supported by WWF for Educational Fund for Nature Program,  
401 Cétamada association, CNRS, and the Total Foundation for Oceans & Biodiversity.

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518 **TABLES AND FIGURES**

519 **Table 1**

520 Non-exhaustive list of photogrammetric approaches used for measuring whales at sea. For  
521 Aerial vehicle: (\*\*\*) expensive, time and resource consuming aerial vehicle. (\*\*)  
522 efficient/specialized but expensive aerial vehicle. (\*) Low price/standard vehicle. (.) Aerial  
523 vehicle not required. For Range measurement tool: (\*\*\*) Efficient/specialized but expensive  
524 tool. (\*\*) Moderate price/standard tool or pre-integrated in the vehicle. For Image  
525 measurement tool: (\*\*\*) highly specialized scientific tool. (\*\*) Paid software/Script available  
526 for free but requiring paid software. (\*) Free software/Script and software available for free.  
527 (a) Based on linear measurements of a known-sized object. (b) Based on linear  
528 measurements of individual adult whales. (c) Based on measurements of the surface area of  
529 individual whales.



Reference	Aerial vehicle	Type	Range measurement tool	Scale basis	Lens distortion correction	Image measurement tool	CV (%)	Error (%)
Cubbage & Calambokidis (1987)	Airplane (OA) ***	Stereo-photogrammetry	Radar altimeter **	Independent reference object	No	Stereoplotter ***	1.7 (a)	0.5 (a)
Best and R�ther (1992)	Helicopter (OA) ***	Single-camera-photogrammetry	Radar altimeter **	Independent reference object	No	Stereoplotter ***	1.3 (b)	-
Dawson <i>et al.</i> (1995)	(Not required) .	Stereo-photogrammetry	(Not required)	Camera characteristics (obtained from calibration)	No	Stereoplotter ***	4.4 (b)	< 2.5 (a)
Spitz <i>et al.</i> (2000)	(Not required) .	Single-camera-photogrammetry	Sonar **	Camera characteristics (obtained from calibration)	Yes	Adobe Photoshop software (Adobe) **	4.3 (a)	4.6 (a)
Perryman & Lynn (2002)	Airplane (OA) ***	Single-camera-photogrammetry	Radar altimeter **	Camera characteristics (factory specifications)	No	Image Pro Plus (Media Cybernetics) **	2 (b)	1 (a)
Jaquet (2006)	(Not required)	Single-camera-photogrammetry	Laser range finder **	Independent reference object	No	Adobe Photoshop software (Adobe) **	1.3 (b)	0.27 (a)
Fearnbach <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Helicopter (OA) ***	Single-camera-photogrammetry	GPS ***	Camera characteristics (factory specifications)	No	ImageJ software (NIH) *	-	< 3.2 (a)
Miller <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Airplane (OA) ***	Single-camera-photogrammetry	Radar altimeter **	Independent reference object	No	Image Pro Plus (Media Cybernetics) **	1.7 (b)	-

Durban <i>et al.</i> (2015, 2016)	APH-22 hexacopter (UAV) **	Single-camera- photogrammetry	High precision barometer **	Camera characteristics (factory specifications)	No	-	-	< 1 (a)
Christiansen <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Splashdrone quadcopter (UAV) **	Single-camera- photogrammetry	(Not required)	Reference object in the same frame as the target animal	No	Custom-written script in R *	< 12 (c)	-
Dawson <i>et al.</i> (2017)	DJI Inspire Pro (UAV) **	Single-camera- photogrammetry	LIDAR ***	Camera characteristics, (obtained from calibration)	Yes	Custom-written script in MATLAB **	1.2 (b)	1 (a)
Christiansen <i>et al.</i> (2018)	DJI Inspire Pro (UAV) **	Single-camera- photogrammetry	LIDAR ***	Camera characteristics (factory specifications)	No	Custom-written script in R *	0.3 (b)	4.75 (b)
Burnett <i>et al.</i> (2019)	DJI Phantom 3 Pro/4/4 Pro (UAV) *	Single-camera- photogrammetry	Barometer **	Independent reference object	Yes	Custom-written script in MATLAB **	< 5 (b)	-

531 **Table 2**

532 Morphometric measurements of mothers and calves from photogrammetry and reproductive  
 533 category of the mothers based on their estimated length. Length corresponds to standard  
 534 length, i.e., length from the tip of the snout to the notch of the tail fluke. Width represents the  
 535 maximum body width.

Pair ID	Mother			Calf	
	Length (m)	Width (m)	Category	Length (m)	Width (m)
1	12.8	2.9	Multiparous	4.9	0.9
2	14	3.6	Multiparous	4.8	1.1
3	13.1	2.9	Primiparous	4.9	0.9
4	14.7	3.2	Multiparous	7.2	1.5
5	12.7	3.1	Primiparous	4.6	1
6	10.2	2.3	Primiparous	3.6	0.7
7	12.1	3	Primiparous	5	1.1
8	12.1	2.6	Primiparous	4.9	1
9	12.4	2.7	Primiparous	4.6	0.9
10	13.7	3	Multiparous	6.6	1.4
11	12.1	2.8	Primiparous	4.3	1
12	10.7	2.2	Primiparous	4.4	1
13	12.4	2.6	Primiparous	4.9	1
14	11.2	2.7	Primiparous	4.9	1
15	12.6	3	Primiparous	4.6	1
16	11	2.1	Primiparous	5.3	1

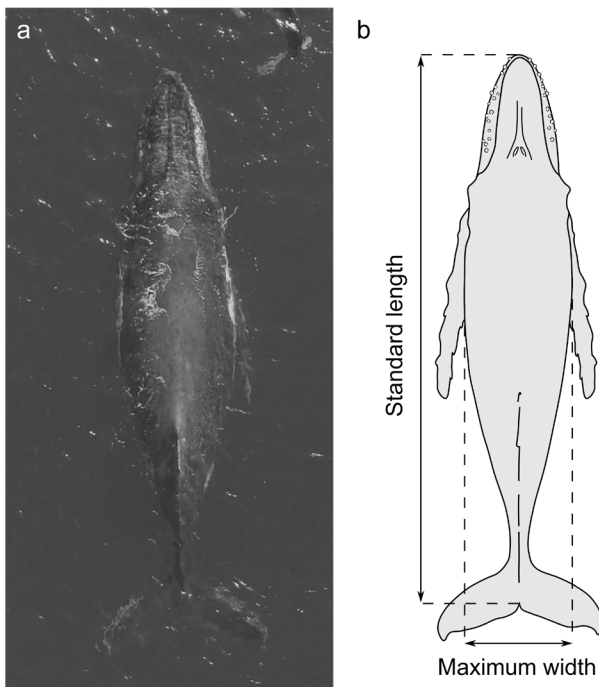
536

537 **Figure 1**

538

539 Figure 1. (a) Example of acceptable aerial photograph of humpback whale extracted from the  
540 video recording and used for photogrammetry. The original image was of 4096×2160-pixel  
541 but was cropped in this figure to highlight the fixed criteria. The whale must be flat at the  
542 surface, dorsal side facing up, emerged as much as possible, static or travelling at relatively  
543 slow speed, with a contour not masked by chops and with a non-arching body axis and  
544 peduncle. (b) Measurements in pixel recorded for each photograph.

545



546

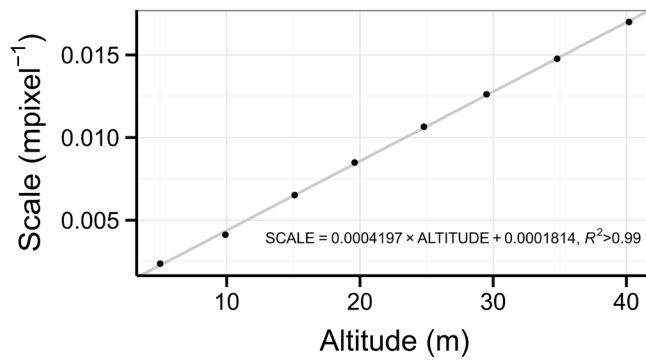
547

548 **Figure 2**

549

550 Figure 2. Relationship between photographic scale and height at which the photos were  
551 taken. Multiplied by the number of pixels, the regression equation gives length in meter.

552



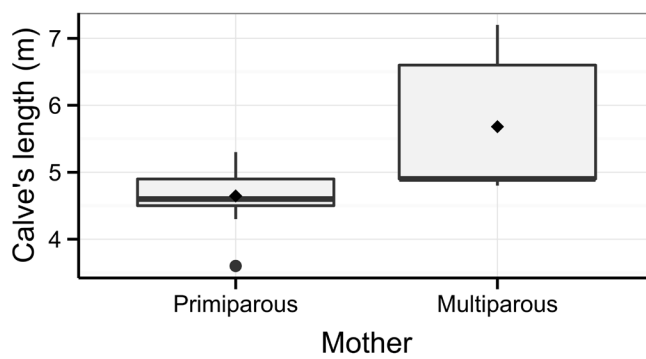
553

554 **Figure 3**

555

556 Figure 3. Calves' estimated standard body length according to the parity of their mother. The  
557 bold black lines represent the median and the diamonds represent the mean. The difference  
558 found was not statistically significant (Wilcoxon test;  $W = 43$  and  $p = 0.084$ ).

559



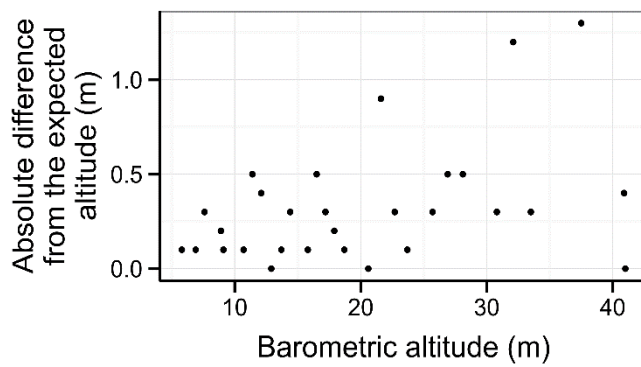
560

561 **Figure 4**

562

563 Figure 4. Barometric altitude reading versus its absolute difference from the expected  
564 altitude. The correlation was low and not statistically significant (Spearman's correlation test;  
565  $\rho = 0.354$ ,  $S = 2624$  and  $p = 0.06$ ).

566



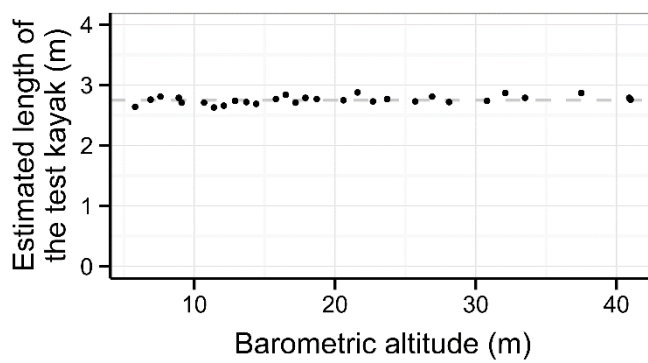
567

568 **Figure 5**

569

570 Figure 5. Repetitive estimation ( $N = 29$ ) of the length of the test kayak at an altitude from  
571 5.8 m to 40.9 m. The grey horizontal dashed line indicates the real length of the kayak  
572 (2.75 m). The coefficient of variation (CV) of the estimations was of 2.31%.

573



574

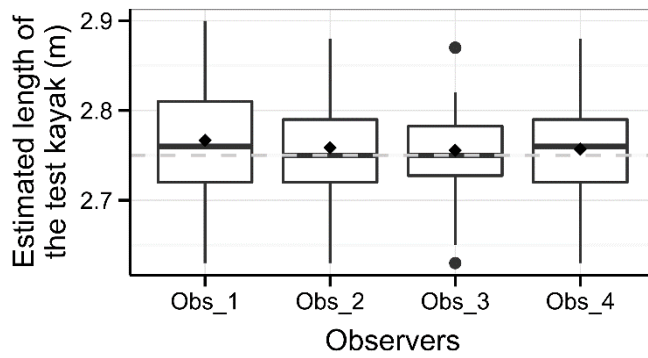


575 **Figure 6**

576

577 Figure 6. Repetitive estimation ( $N = 29$ ) of the length of the test kayak compared between  
578 four independent observers. The grey horizontal dashed line indicates the real length of the  
579 kayak (2.75 m). The difference found was not statistically significant (Kruskal-Wallis test;  
580  $\chi^2 = 0.511$ ,  $df = 3$  and  $p = 0.916$ ).

581



582