

Scientists enlisting public's help in identifying whale dialects

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In recent years, crowd sourcing has been shown to be an effective means of categorizing large amounts of data by large groups of people, the project that uses [captcha's](#) to help translate text on the Internet, for example, has been a great success. Now, scientists that study whale sounds are asking the public for help in matching whale sounds made by one whale to those made by others in other groups. They hope is that by gathering the ears of many listeners, progress can be made in figuring out if different groups of whales have different dialects, and maybe even in deciphering what some whale sounds actually mean.

Called the Whale Song Project, the idea has been launched by *Scientific American*, and is part of the Zooniverse project whereby citizen scientists, as the site describes them, help professional scientists by searching or sifting through data or pictures to find patterns that can

help, for example, to find new galaxies. In this case, the professional scientists are from the St. Andrews Sea Mammal Research Unit in Scotland and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in the U.S.

The whale sounds have been collected over many years by researchers affixing temporary microphones to orca or pilot [whales](#) (both members of the dolphin family) and through the use of microphones submerged beneath boats or buoys. The problem has been, as the data mounts, the material available starts to overwhelm. With thousands of sounds to analyze and just a few hundred scientists working to figure out if sounds between different pods for example vary slightly, or if different types of whales of the same species sing in entirely different languages, it becomes a nearly impossible task. Thus, enlisting citizen scientists to help seems only natural, as all it takes is a pair of ears and a willingness to listen.

Those that are interested can go to the [Whale FM](#) site and start listening to whale songs and matching them to others without any further obligation, though those users that wish to can create a free account on the site that will allow them to do things like follow whales under study as they move around in the ocean. When listening and matching, citizen scientists are also shown on a map where the sounds were recorded, which may help in deciding whether another song is similar in some respects, or not. Some have suggested that in addition to helping scientists crack the mysteries of whale songs, citizen scientists also benefit from the calming effect that listening to them appears to elicit.

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