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Humpback whale surveys in the Chesterfield Archipelago: A reflection using 19th century whaling records

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The Chesterfield Archipelago is a large, uninhabited complex located in the central Coral Sea (19°–22°S, 158°–160°E), halfway between Australia and the main island of New Caledonia (Fig. 1a). It is composed of two main plateaus, the Chesterfield platform and the Bellona platform (Missègue and Collot 1987), covering a total area of about 16,000 km². These plateaus are surrounded by reefs, islets and coral sand cays, forming relatively shallow lagoons (45–80 m deep) largely open to the Coral Sea.

This vast complex potentially represents an important habitat for cetaceans, in particular for wintering humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) that typically spend their breeding season in these latitudes. Several points suggest that the archipelago is, or at least was, important for this species. First, it presents all the characteristics of a suitable habitat for breeding humpback whales in terms of depth and water temperature (Dawbin 1966, Herman and Antinofa 1977, Whitehead and Moore 1982, Smultea 1994, Johnston *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, records from the 19th century whaling ships indicate that a substantial number of catches were made in the region (Townsend 1935). In fact, Townsend's work based on U.S. logbook records suggests that the Chesterfield Archipelago could have been, along with Tonga, one of the main whaling grounds for humpback whales in the South Pacific during the 19th century. According to newspaper archives, Australian whalers also regularly visited the area in search of whales during the 1860s and 1870s. As many as 49 voyages from Australian boats were recorded during that time, yielding 1,551 tons of humpback whale oil and 7,952 kg of whalebone (baleen).² Navigating these waters was then dangerous, as testified by multiple shipwrecks along the reefs (<http://www.patrimoine-maritime.asso.nc>). Yet, in 1863, a whaling station was set up at the Chesterfields by Captain

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