



FACTSHEET

Humpback Whale



Humpback Whale

Common Name: Humpback Whale

Scientific Name: *Megaptera novaengliae*

Noongar Name: Mamong

Conservation Status: Listed as Least Concern under ICUN (2014). The Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act also classifies Humpback Whales as Vulnerable.

All cetaceans (marine mammals) are protected within the Australian Whale Sanctuary under the EPBC Act. The Sanctuary includes all Commonwealth waters from the three nautical mile State waters limit out to the boundary of the Exclusive Economic Zone (out to 200 nm and further in some places). The waters around Rottnest Island are a designated Marine Reserve.

Habitat: Narrow coastal corridors, off-shore waters

Body length: 14-18 m

Weight: Up to 50 tonnes

Gestation period: 11-15 months

Number of young: 1

Description:

The Humpback Whale is a very large marine mammal. It is a baleen whale. This means that it has large plates made of keratin which hang from its upper jaw instead of teeth. Baleen whales filter the seawater to extract their food. A whale may have as many as 300 to 400 baleen plates on either side of their mouth.

The Humpback is mainly black and has a white throat and white throat grooves. It has very long pectoral fins which can be up to a third of their body length. These fins are a mixture of black and white. This whale has a huge tail fin called a fluke. The fluke's underside has black and white markings which are unique to that whale. Its dorsal fin is small and it has a broad head covered in fleshy knobs. The Humpback has a distinctive hump which shows as they arch their back when they dive.

Diet:

Krill, zooplankton



In the Wild:

Humpback Whales are a migratory species. They spend their summer months in the feeding grounds near the Antarctic. They feed on swarms of krill (small prawn-like creature about 4 cm long) and can eat up to two tonnes a day! They build up a thick layer of fat reserves called blubber. This layer is rich in oil and was the reason whales were hunted from the seventeenth century until commercial whaling was banned in 1986.

Humpback whales tend to feed alone. Humpbacks use their huge mouths to capture krill swarms in the seawater. They filter the seawater out leaving their food behind. Humpbacks use 'bubble feeding' to bring the krill swarms together making them easier to catch. They blow lots of bubbles in a ring under the krill swarms forcing them together and trapping them inside the ring. They then swim up through this ring with their mouth open. Sometimes a group will work together to do this.

Every year, Humpbacks form groups and migrate north to the warmer winter breeding grounds closer to the Equator like the Great Barrier Reef. Mothers and their calves will swim very close to each other on this journey. The whales will feed a little

along the way on zooplankton but feeding is not their focus.

Humpback Whales are powerful swimmers, sometimes they will breach. This is when they throw themselves out of the water, roll in the air and crash back down. Scientists do not know why they do this. Another mystery is the songs that these whales sing. These can last for hours and the sounds can travel huge distances through the water.

Threats:

- Climate change affecting their migration routes, breeding and feeding sites, and food supply
- Pollution
- Stranding
- Predation by Orcas on calves
- Illegal whaling
- Noise pollution (noise of ships, seismic surveying)
- Injury from shipping

DID YOU KNOW?

A Humpback calf has to be brought to the surface by its mother when it is born to start its breathing through its blowhole. A newborn calf weighs around 680kg and is about 4m long. Without air in its lungs to keep it afloat, a calf would tend to sink!