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Why we love humpback whales – humpback whales are not only surprisingly acrobatic for their vast size, frequently leaping out of the water, but are also renowned for their beautiful songs.

Humpback Whale

KEY FACTS

Length up to 18m

Weight approximately 36,000kg

Mating and calving season
June to August

**Status under Australian
Federal law** Vulnerable, migratory



Arguably the most well-known and best-loved of all the whales, humpback whales are known to sing for minutes or hours. Solitary male humpback whales are most often heard singing, with their haunting moans audible for several kilometres underwater. Scientists have not yet agreed on a single reason for why humpback whales sing – it could be to attract females, to communicate or to navigate – and so it remains one of nature’s most endearing mysteries.

What do they look like?

Humpback whales are black or grey on top and white on the underside. On the throat, the white skin folds into numerous grooves. Humpback whales can be most easily identified by the very long, pectoral fins (their 'arms'), which measure around one-third of the length of the entire body. Also look out for the hump on the front edge of the fin on their back (the dorsal fin), and the jagged edge of the tail or 'fluke'. The bumps and nicks of the tail fluke and its pattern of black and white vary between each humpback whale, and so is an effective way for scientists to identify individuals. Interestingly, female humpback whales are typically larger than the males.

What's their lifecycle?

Like many other whales, humpback whales are migratory, meaning they move between areas where they feed and areas where they

calve and breed. In winter, they come to Australia to give birth in the tropical waters of the Great Barrier Reef on the east coast and the Kimberley coast on the west. They remain here to nurse their young and to mate, before beginning their epic journey back to the Southern Ocean to feed all summer long.

Humpback whales feed on tiny ocean creatures, krill (a small shrimp-like animal) and small fish. The many grooves on the whale's throat allow it to open its mouth widely and ocean water floods in. The water is then pushed back out of the mouth through comb-like baleen plates which hang from the upper jaw. The baleen plates act like a sieve, allowing ocean water out but trapping the prey in the whale's mouth, which is then swallowed

What threats do they face?

During their long migration up and down

Australia's coast, humpback whales face the danger of becoming entangled in fishing gear and shark nets. This can impair their ability to breath, swim and feed or wounds can become infected, leading to death over a prolonged period.

Humpback whales are also at risk from collisions with boats, known as 'ship strikes'. Ship strikes can severely injure whales or can even be fatal. The risk to humpback whales in Australia is likely to increase with growth in shipping traffic through humpback whale nurseries in the Great Barrier Reef.

Humpback whales are likely to be sensitive to disturbance from underwater man-made noise. This noise, including from boat activity and seismic testing by oil and gas companies, may disrupt essential communication between whales or deter them from important habitat.

Where can I see them?

There are many opportunities to see humpback whales up and down the east and west coasts of Australia. Some of the key areas are marked on the map. They migrate north between June and August and return south between September and November.

