In order to be able to conserve whales and marine life effectively, scientists need to find out more about the biology, habits and numbers of whales and dolphins. Around the British Isles, minke whales and other marine mammals face a range of threats, including pollution and disturbance from ships and industrial activities such as oil exploration. These may damage important habitats, for example, the continental shelf edge west of the Shetland Islands and Outer Hebrides, an area which appears to be prime whale habitat.

IFAW promotes the development and use of benign research. Since 1987, IFAW’s research vessel ‘Song of the Whale’ has covered more than 300,000 miles and worked in over 20 countries, providing a platform for pioneering studies on threatened marine mammals. In 2004, the original vessel was replaced with a purpose designed and built research vessel. The work of the ‘Song of the Whale’ team is vitally important in showing that we do not need to kill whales to study them.

Whales, dolphins and porpoises are protected by UK and European law. If you see anyone harassing them, please inform the police. The WISE Scheme, Green Blue Initiative (a joint RYA and BMF initiative) and wildlife organisations work with boat and marine craft users to increase awareness and ensure responsible behaviour around marine wildlife. Under UK law boat users must ensure that they avoid affecting whales, dolphins, porpoises and basking sharks through reckless behaviour or intentional disturbance.

For further information on the IWC’s proposed general principles for whale watching and IFAW’s reports on various aspects of whale watching, see the whale watching section of the IFAW web site.

Take action now by writing to your MP urging the Government to improve protection for whales. Visit www.stopwhaling.co.uk to learn more.

Minke whales are slender and streamlined with a pointed snout. They may swim at speeds of around 30 km/hour and have been reported to surf along next to yachts on ocean passages.

A species which communicates using sounds... These include low frequency grunts and thumps which can be detected over tens or even hundreds of miles.

Now the prime target of the whaling industry... The diminutive minke whale was once considered too small for whalers to target. It is now the only whale present in substantial numbers. Despite the whaling moratorium, each year around 2,000 minke whales are killed by Norway and Iceland in the North Atlantic and by Japan in the North Pacific and Southern Ocean Sanctuary.
Minke business

In 1982, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) adopted an indefinite moratorium (ban) on commercial whaling, which came into effect in 1986. The whalers had moved from one species of whale to the next (starting with the largest), drastically depleting the populations they left behind, until only the minke whale remained in large numbers.

Despite international protection, Norway, Iceland and Japan continue to set catches of around 2,300 minke whales each year* either under a formal objection to the whaling moratorium (Norway) or using the loophole of ‘scientific’ whaling. In Norway and Iceland the actual catches are often lower than those set and seem limited by the demand for whale meat. Norway and Iceland lobby hard to resume international trade in whale meat with Japan, in order to realise huge profits.

History has shown that it is almost impossible to police such a trade.

Despite international protection, Norway, Iceland and Japan set catches of around 2,300 minke whales each year, while Norway set a 2006 catch of 1,054 whales. Iceland intends to take its traditional 2006 catch in 2007.


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History has shown that it is almost impossible to police such a trade.

The Minke whale – local hero

Most people do not realise that minke whales (and at least twelve other species of whale and dolphin) are regularly spotted around our shores, and most are unaware that it is possible to go whale watching in the British Isles.

Whale and dolphin watching trips are available from Mull, Oban, Arisaig and Gairloch on the west coast of Scotland, in the Moray Firth and Stonehaven in NE Scotland, from New Quay in West Wales, Pwllheli and Neyland in West Wales and in Dingle Bay and the Shannon estuary in SW Ireland. In addition, you may be fortunate enough to see marine mammals (whales, dolphins and seals) from a number of coastal lookout spots around Britain and Ireland. Information should be available from local tourist offices and Wildlife Trusts.

Other species of whale and dolphin present around Britain and Ireland include harbour porpoise, bottlenose, common, striped, white-beaked, Atlantic white-sided and Risso’s dolphin, orca, long-finned pilot and northern bottlenose whale, fin and humpback whale.

MINKE WHALE BEHAVIOUR

1 Spyhop

This is when a whale pokes its head above the surface of the water, perhaps to have a look around. Minke whales are notoriously nosy and may often be seen spyhopping!

2 Blow

This describes both the act of breathing and the cloud of water vapour produced when a whale breathes out. The blow of a minke whale is quick, small and hard to spot even in calm seas.

3 Dive

Minke whales arch their tail stock before diving, but do not show their tail flukes as they dive. They usually dive for three to eight minutes, although they may remain underwater for up to 20 minutes.

4 Surfacing

Minke whales break the surface with their pointed snouts. When travelling, they normally take one or two breaths between dives. The blow-holes and fin are usually visible simultaneously.

5 Breaching

Minke whales may breach quite frequently, especially in bad weather and during feeding bouts. They propel themselves out of the water, often clearing the surface with most of their body, and splash down onto the water surface on their belly, back or side.

6 Lunge feeding

Minke whales often feed near the surface, pursuing schools of fish, which may attract seabirds such as shearwaters, gannets, gulls and auks. Worldwide, minke whales feed on a wide variety of prey ranging from zooplankton to herring, sand eels and other small fish.

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Whale watching guidelines; do it right

Watching whales, dolphins and porpoises (collectively known as cetaceans) in their natural habitat can be exciting and inspirational, but care must be taken to avoid disturbing them, as this could cause them to leave the area, and may interfere with normal feeding and social behaviour. It is a privilege to be able to watch cetaceans in the wild and it is important that we protect them for years to come.

The best whale watching experiences involve animals that are undisturbed and ‘choose’ to initiate the encounter. The aim of good whale watching is to observe the normal behaviour of cetaceans. Cetaceans may even approach the vessel, if it is operated with caution and sensitivity around them.

All commercial whale watchers should operate to a code of conduct. Choose trips operated by a recognised accredited operator, who will be following comprehensive guidelines.

IFAW and many other groups have proposed guidelines for ‘responsible’ wildlife watching, aimed at minimising its impact. The following guidelines are suggested for watching minke whales (although most points will also apply to other species of cetacean).

- Always keep a good look out – if you see whales, slow down and avoid sudden changes in speed, direction or noise.
- Approach whales with caution and never from head-on. Keep the engine running to ensure both your manoeuvrability and that the whale has heard you.
- Never chase, encircle or overtake whales or cause groups to separate. Leave a good distance between the boat and the whale. If the boat gets too close the whale may become frightened and swim away.
- Remember, the best encounters occur when the whales themselves decide to approach you!
- Exercise extreme caution if mother/calf pairs or young whales are present – they may be easily disturbed and more susceptible to collisions. Ideally, leave them alone.
- If whales show any signs of becoming disturbed or alarmed, move away slowly and keep away.
- If you observe another vessel enjoying an encounter with a whale, wait until they have moved out of the area before you approach.
- On some occasions whales will simply not be ‘in the mood’ to be approached. Don’t put pressure on your operator to break the guidelines to get close on these occasions.
- Dispose of fuel, oil, litter, food and other contaminants appropriately on shore.