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Why we love sperm whales – the sperm whale has the largest brain on earth!

Sperm Whale

KEY FACTS

Length up to 18m

Weight up to 50,000kg

Mating season July to August

**Status under Australian
Federal law** Migratory



These sociable and deep-diving whales get their name from a peculiar organ inside their giant heads, the spermaceti organ, which contains a type of oil that in the past whalers thought looked like semen. These incredible animals were sadly hunted for this oil, which was used to fuel lamps and make candles, soaps and cosmetics. The spermaceti organ is actually used in echolocation, a remarkable method of communication and navigation also used by bats, in which the whale produces clicks that bounce off objects back to the whale.

What do they look like?

Sperm whales are easily recognised by their huge, block-shaped heads. The grey-brown skin is fairly smooth on their enormous head, but forms distinctive wrinkles along their log-shaped body. Two-thirds down the whale's back is a distinct triangular or rounded hump. Male and female sperm whales are very different sizes; females typically grow to 11m whereas male sperm whales can be up to an impressive 18m long. The spray of water vapour from the blowhole as the whale exhales is typically the first sign of a sperm whale at the ocean's surface. The blow of a sperm whale is a characteristic bushy cloud that shoots off to the left. Sperm whales generally blow every 10 to 30 seconds during the 5 to 15 minutes that they remain at the surface before diving to great depths to feed.

What's their lifecycle?

Sperm whales feed mainly on medium-sized squid, which they hunt for using echolocation, but they may also hunt for giant squid, octopuses and rays. Sperm whales are able to dive to incredible depths, venturing into underwater canyons to search for prey, and are able to remain underwater for a remarkable 2 hours.

Female sperm whales usually live in groups of up to 12 adult females with their young. Male sperm whales leave these groups when they become mature, at the age of about 10, and join other mature males in 'bachelor groups'. As male sperm whales grow older, they typically leave these groups and live solitary lives.

What threats do they face?

Southwest Australia was the last stronghold of the whaling industry in Australia and sperm whales were hunted from the whaling station in Albany until 1978.

The impacts of whaling are still being felt by sperm whales in this region and despite decades of total protection, male sperm whale numbers are still very low. As a result, the sperm whales in this population will be more vulnerable to other threats.

Sperm whales are likely to be sensitive to disturbance from underwater man-made noise. This noise, including from ships and seismic testing by oil and gas companies, may disrupt sperm whales as they hunt for prey and deter them from important areas of habitat.

Sperm whales are also at risk from boat disturbance and collisions with boats, also known as 'ship strikes'. Ship strikes can severely injure sperm whales or can even be fatal. Ship strikes and boat disturbance are particular threats to sperm whales where busy shipping areas overlap with important habitat.

Where can I see them?

Sperm whales have been recorded in the ocean all around Australia, but as they prefer to live in very deep water, usually deeper than 200 metres and often over 1,000 metres deep, you are unlikely to ever see one from the coast. Key areas where scientists are most likely to spot these incredible mammals are marked on the map.

