Ningaloo Coast
World Heritage Area

fact sheet

Humpback Whales

Giant Migrators

The Ningaloo Coast and neighbouring Exmouth Gulf is the winter playground for the charismatic humpback whale *(Megaptera novaeangliae).*

Good Looks

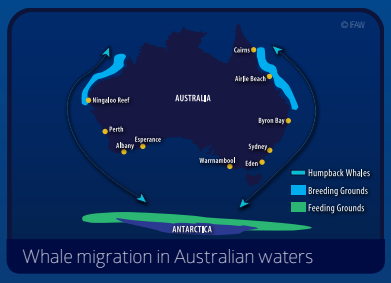
Humpback whales are named after their distinct, hump-like fin on their back. They are the fifth largest of the great whales.

Watch these humpback whales in action

Credit: Lyn Irvine

Home

Whales are winter visitors to Ningaloo. After spending summer in Antarctica feeding and fattening up, they migrate 6000km up the Western Australian coast to mate and calf. They start their southern migration in September and females with calves stop off in the Exmouth Gulf to nurse and rest until November.



Whale migration in Australian waters

Family

The Western Australian population of humpback whales are genetically different from the eastern Australian population and the two very rarely mix. The West Coast population has been increasing at approximately 10% per annum after nearly been eliminated by whaling and in 2014 was estimated to be 30,000 individuals. The whales unique patterns allow scientists to estimate populations and their movements.

LISTEN TO WHALESONG HERE

Humpback whales have a unique life cycle. When sexually mature around 4-10 years, they use the warmer northern waters to mate and give birth. At birth, calves are the size of a small car up to 4.5m long and weigh 1 tonne but have no protective blubber. To build up their blubber so they can survive in Antarctica, calves drink up to 240 litres of milk per day with a 45% to 60% fat content from their mother.

A nursing calf can gain more than 45 kg a day during its first weeks of life. A female has a calf on average every 2-3 years. Fathers do not stay with the family but the females stay together and help each other.

A mother helping her calf to breathe

Credit: Lyn Irvine

Favourite Foods

Despite their size, humpback whales only eat krill which is smaller than your pinky fingernail. Feeding techniques such as 'lunge feeding' and 'bubble netting' are used to gulp up large volumes of water and filter out krill through their broom like baleen plates. They are known to feed alone and co-operatively.

They can eat up to 1000kg of food each day which helps them build their huge layer of blubber to keep them warm in the freezing Antarctic waters. During their northward migration they live mostly off their fat reserves, however opportunistic feeding has been observed at Ningaloo.

Friends and Foes

On the southern migration, humpback calves are vulnerable to predators like killer whales so they tend to stay closer to shore, hugging the reef for protection. Male 'escorts' are also used to help mothers protect their calves.

Other whale species that visit the Ningaloo Coast include:

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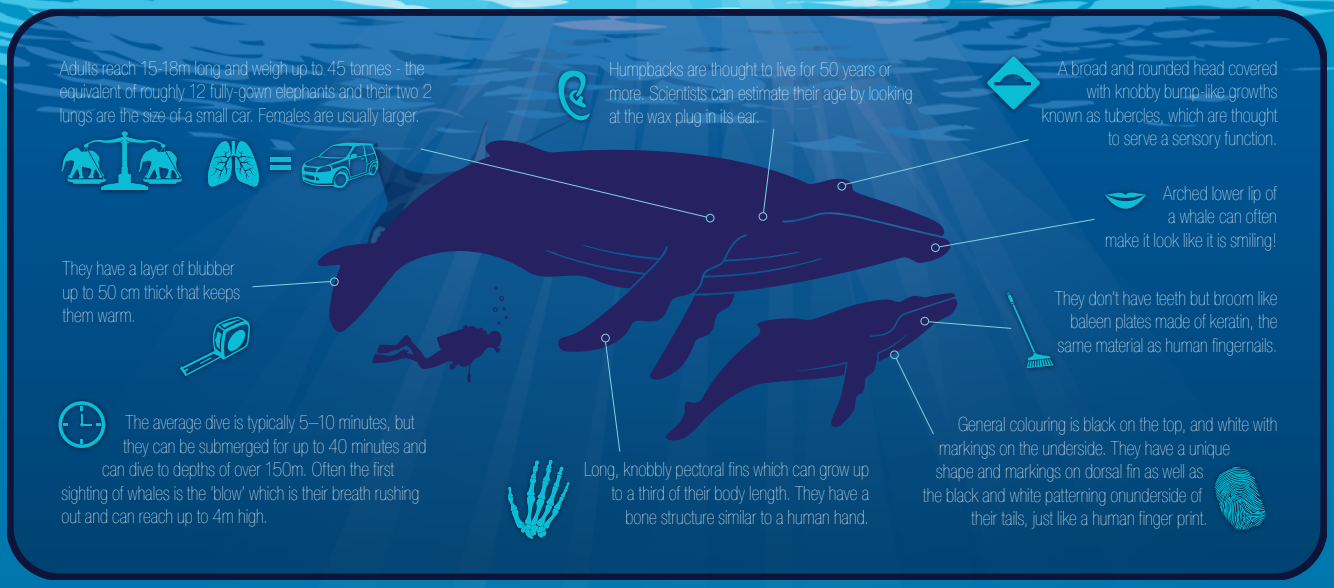
More on Humpback Whales



Killer whales (orcas)

Their annual visits to Ninglaoo coincides with the humpback whale migration which is a major food source for them. They are highly social, forming groups of mixed sex, with calves and juveniles. A photo ID program has shown the Ningaloo family consists of up to 20 killer whales. The dorsal fin of a male adult killer whale is straight and tall (up to 1.8 metres high) and they have a predicted lifespan of up to 90 years.

Dwarf minke whale:

Occasionally seen at Ningaloo, these whales can be both elusive and inquisitive. They have been known to approach slow-moving vessels, snorkellers and divers.

Pygmy blue whale:

Also travelling up to the Kimberely mainly staying offshore in areas like Scott Reef and Rowley Shoals. They can grow up to 24m.

Playtime

Humpbacks are one of the marine megastars. They are playful, inquisitive creatures and often put on spectacular, acrobatic displays of breaching, rolling, spyhopping and tail and pectoral fin slapping. This

Whale Play - a double whale breach

Whale Play - a double pectoral fin slap

Credit: Lyn Irvine

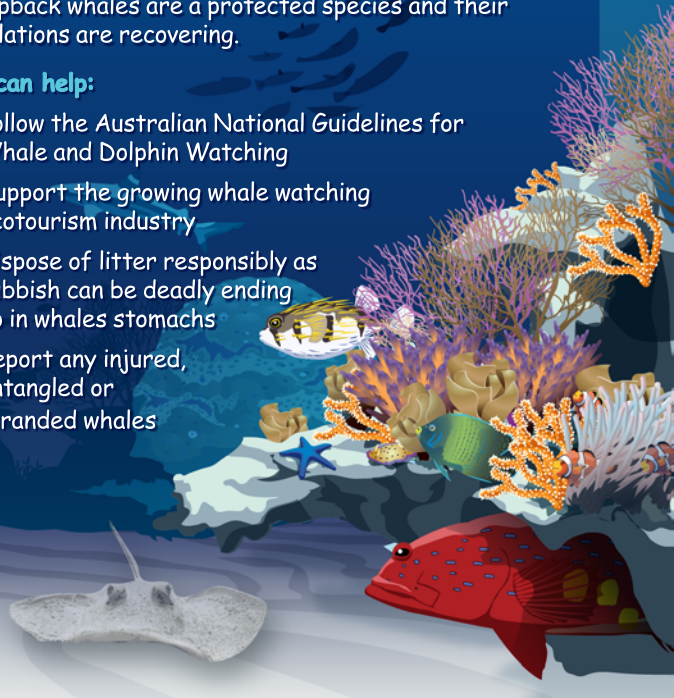
is for play as well as communication between whales. They sleep by catnapping on the surface at short intervals whilst still moving their drooping tails to help keep their blowholes above the surface.

Helping Hand

Humpback whales are a protected species and their populations are recovering.

You can help:

- Follow the Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching
- Support the growing whale watching ecotourism industry
- Dispose of litter responsibly as rubbish can be deadly ending up in whales stomachs
- Report any injured, entangled or stranded whales



Shire of Exmouth

NINGALOO COAST WORLD HERITAGE

PARKS AND WILDLIFE