



ANTARCTICA NEW ZEALAND INFORMATION SHEET

WHALES

Whales: - exploitation to protection

The killing of whales was one of the early reasons for venturing into Antarctic waters and claiming territory. In the early 1800s, and then for another phase after gun-powered harpoons were invented in 1870, whaling ships ventured south. About 1.3 million whales have been taken in Antarctic waters this century. Populations of the right, blue and humpback whales were decimated. It is estimated only about one percent of their original numbers survive. The fin and sei whales were also depleted to about 10-20 percent of their original population level.

The reduction in whale numbers began causing concern and in 1946 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established to regulate whaling operators, although this did not prevent continuing degradation of blue and humpback whale numbers or the serious depletion of the fin, sei and sperm whales.

With growing international concern for whales, blue and humpback whales were fully protected in 1963. Quotas for other species were gradually reduced until full protection was given to fin and sei whales in the 1970s. A complete ban on commercial whaling came into effect in 1986, although whaling continued illegally and under the guise of scientific whaling.

The long-lived, slow-breeding whales will take a long time to recover from past whaling pressures. It is thought the right and humpback whales may be recovering at the rate of up to seven percent a year, but no increase has been noted in blue and fin whale populations.

A Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary was declared by the International Whaling Commission in May 1994. The sanctuary extends from Antarctica to 40°S, which includes New Zealand waters south of about Wanganui. About 90 percent of the world's whales live in this region and should now be safe from commercial whaling. The minke whale is relatively numerous, with an estimated population of about 760 000. The blue whale, on the other hand, numbers only about 450, down from its pre-whaling level of an estimated 250 000.

Whale types and migration

The whales do not live in Antarctica all year round. They are found there in the summer, feeding on krill and other marine resources, and in the autumn head north into the warmer waters of the tropics. There they give birth, the calf feeding on its mother's rich milk before migrating back to Antarctic waters.

Fourteen species of cetaceans (the name given to whales, dolphins and porpoises) are found in Antarctica. Of these, twelve are whales. There are two groups, the baleen whales and the toothed whales. Cetaceans are highly intelligent mammals. They communicate with sound which also serves as an echo location system.

Baleen is a huge hairy-edged plate in the whale's mouth, which acts as a sieve. The whale sieves out krill, small fish and crustaceans.

Six species of baleen whales are found in Antarctica, including the huge blue whale, which is the largest animal that has ever lived. It grows up to 24 metres and can weigh 84 tonnes. Other baleen species are the fin, southern right whale, sei, minke and humpback.

Four species of toothed whales are found in Antarctica. Except for the sperm whale, they are much smaller than the baleen whales and weren't widely hunted. The other species are the southern bottlenose whale, the orca whale and the southern fourtooth whale. They all have teeth and feed on fish and squid. The orcas also take penguins and seals.

FURTHER READING

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