

WHALES & DOLPHINS



Whales, dolphins and porpoises belong to a group of animals known as cetaceans. They are mammals – not fish – meaning that they are warm-blooded, breathe air and give birth to live young (unlike fish, who lay eggs). Whales and dolphins are highly intelligent social animals who live in small family groups called pods. Whales communicate with each other by songs, made up of low-pitched sounds, which can travel long distances through the ocean. Each family or pod has its own dialect. Orcas – who are often mistakenly described as killer whales – are actually dolphins. Offspring stay with their mothers for their whole life.

There are more than 80 species of cetaceans, divided into two groups: 'toothed' whales and 'baleen' whales.

The Whale Family

Baleen whales do not have teeth. Instead they have rows of bony plates through which they strain seawater for tiny sea creatures. All of the large whales, except for the sperm whale, are baleens. The blue whale is the largest creature ever to inhabit the planet, and reaches lengths of more than 30 metres and can weigh more than 150 tonnes (the same as 30 elephants) – all on a diet of tiny plankton, shrimp and krill!

Toothed whales, as their name suggests, have mouths lined with sharp teeth. Sperm whales are toothed. The group also includes all dolphins and porpoises. These animals use echolocation to find their prey.

History Of Whaling

Humans have hunted whales for centuries. Their large size and relatively slow speed makes them an extremely easy and profitable catch.

Originally, whales were killed for the oil in their fat or blubber, which was used for lamps, lipstick, soap and ointments. Their bones were used for carvings, tools and, in the 1800s, to stiffen corsets, which women wore to pull in their waists. Whale meat was considered a delicacy in some parts of the world and, in Japan, still is.

With the invention of newly-mechanised weapons and boats in the late 1800s, the number of whales slaughtered annually rose dramatically. One species after another

was hunted to the verge of extinction. By the 1950s, there were very few remaining sperm and right whales (so named because, being large and slow, they were the 'right' whale to hunt). The blue whale had also been virtually wiped out. From a 19th century population of 250,000, blue whale numbers are now down to fewer than 5000, while the northern right whale teeters on the brink of extinction, with only 300 individual survivors.

In 1946, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was formed. It set quotas for the numbers of whales each country could kill, but this failed to stop the population declines. In 1975, campaigners from the environmental protection organisation, Greenpeace, took their first non-violent direct action to protect whales. This involved blocking, or in some cases, ramming whaling ships with Greenpeace vessels, or using small rowing boats to block the progress of the whaling ships.

In 1985, the IWC member countries voted to ban all commercial whaling. A moratorium was announced, meaning that whale-hunting would be officially halted. Unfortunately, some countries continue to kill whales in spite of the ban.

Japan uses a loophole in the rules that allows the killing of whales for 'scientific research'. Since the moratorium was enacted, Japan's whaling fleet has killed more than 8,000 animals. This figure does not include the tens of thousands of smaller cetaceans who have also perished as a result of hunting.



Norway, Iceland, The Faroe Islands (which are part of the Kingdom of Denmark) and Japan all still kill whales. These whaling nations are now putting increased pressure on the IWC to overturn the ban on commercial whaling and revert to the futile quota system of the past.

Pollution

For many years, the world's oceans have been regarded as a convenient dumping ground for our waste. Sewage, oil, industrial and agricultural chemicals, fertilisers and household rubbish (including plastic bags) all pollute the oceans and harm the animals who live there.

Animals at the top of the food chain, such as whales and dolphins, are particularly at risk from toxic pollution because their bodies accumulate persistent chemicals (those that break down very slowly), such as PCBs, dioxins and pesticides, which are known to damage their ability to reproduce.

Fishing

By far the greatest threat to whales, dolphins and porpoises today is entanglement in fishing gear. According to the World Wildlife Fund, if current trends continue, several cetacean species will be lost in the next few decades.

Boats fishing for yellowfin tuna off the coasts of Chile and California have been responsible for millions of dolphin deaths. To help them locate their catch, fishermen look out for groups of dolphins, as shoals of tuna are often swimming beneath them. They then surround the dolphins with massive purse seine nets, which are more than 100m deep and several thousand metres long – bigger than a football field! When the catch is winched in, both tuna and dolphins are trapped.

Driftnets, which extend for many miles in the ocean and are dragged along between fishing vessels, have been described as curtains of death. Although they were banned by the United Nations in 1992, after extensive campaigning by animal rights and environmental groups, some countries still use them. Italian fishing boats in the Mediterranean use driftnets up to 20km long to catch swordfish. These nets are thought to be responsible for 1000 whale, dolphin and porpoise deaths each day.

In the North Sea, harbour porpoises are threatened by the growing use of gill nets, which are near-invisible walls

of fine netting that trap fish by the gill cover. An estimated 7,000 die annually in Danish nets alone, while British and Irish fishing boats kill a further 2,000.

Some fishermen deliberately kill dolphins, claiming they eat 'too many' fish. In truth, it is human beings who have over-fished the oceans, decimating numbers and leaving very little for the dolphins to eat.

Captivity

Dolphins, orcas and beluga whales are caught in the wild and sent to aquaria and zoos around the world. Torn from their natural environment and deprived of their strong family bonds, these intelligent animals are sentenced to a lifetime of confinement. Trained to perform unnatural tricks to entertain the public, they lead miserable lives and most die long before they reach old age.

Although the last of Britain's dolphinariums closed down in the 1990s, these cruel marine parks still remain popular tourist attractions in many parts of the world.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

- Join Animal Aid's youth group, Youth4Animals, and help campaign for cetaceans.
- Write to the leaders of whaling nations and urge them to stop!
Embassy of Japan, 101-104 Piccadilly, London, W1V 9FN (info@jpembassy.org.uk)
Embassy of Norway, 25 Belgrave Square, London, SW1X 8QD (emb.london@mfa.no)
Embassy of Iceland, 2A Hans Street, London, SW1X 0JE (info@jpembassy.org.uk)
Faroese Home Government, Government of the Faroe Islands, PO Box 64, FO-110 Torshavn, Faroe Islands (kas@tinganes.fo)
- Never visit aquaria or marine parks that hold whales and dolphins captive.
- If you eat fish, think about the impact that catching them has on them and on other animals in the sea.
- Rubbish kills! When visiting the beach, always take your litter home with you. One dead sperm whale was found to have 50 plastic bags stuck in his throat.
- If you find a dead or stranded whale or dolphin on a beach, immediately inform the police, coast guard or RSPCA.

For more information on helping whales and dolphins, contact Greenpeace, Canonbury Villas, London, N1 2PN, www.greenpeace.org.uk

To help those held captive in marine parks contact the Captive Animals Protection Society, PO Box 573, Preston, PR1 9WW, www.captiveanimals.org