

Department for Environment and Heritage

Southern Right Whale

Great Australian Bight Marine Park



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Government
of South Australia



www.environment.sa.gov.au



The big picture

Southern Right Whales are endangered despite numbers now increasing at 7-8% per year. Australia is the winter home to around 1,500 of the 12,000 or so Southern Right Whales remaining worldwide; still a small fraction of the estimated 60,000 - 100,000 that existed prior to whaling.

The Head of Bight is a critical gathering area for Southern Right Whales with up to half of the Australian population (10% of the global population) using the area. Each year between 25 and 55 calves are born at or near the Head of Bight, making it one of the three largest breeding areas along the Australian coast.

Protection of the whales and their habitat in the Great Australian Bight Marine Park is important for the global conservation of these species. It is one of the best places in the world to see Southern Right Whales. Watching them from land is a great way to appreciate them without disturbing their natural behaviour.



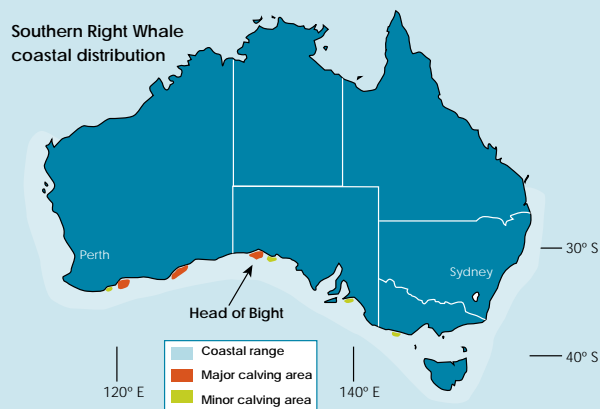
What are the whales doing at the Head of Bight?

Southern Right Whales visit the Head of Bight each year to give birth, mate and socialise. They arrive in May and depart around October. They spend the rest of the time travelling to or feeding well offshore in the Southern Ocean.

In June and July most of the whales you will see are adults. You may be lucky enough to observe these 70 tonne mammals mating (look for groups rolling around on the surface). By late August you can commonly see the mothers swimming along the cliffs with their young calves at their side. At this time there are often 70 or more whales in the area visible from the platform. By the time the whales leave in October the calves have grown and have become strong enough to join their mothers on the long migration south.

Harvest and protection

- 1791** First whale (Sperm Whales) taken in Australian waters by the crew of Britannia after unloading cargo and convicts from Britain.
- 1804** So common in the Derwent River, Tasmania, they were a hazard to small boats.
- 1830** Whaling industry on mainland Australia underway with small onshore stations.
- 1835** Southern Right Whales were considered the right whales to hunt. They come close to shore, float when dead and yield many barrels of oil.
- 1845** Very scarce, no longer profitable to hunt. Nearing extinction.
- 1872** Whaling station set up by the South Australian Company at Victor Harbor ceased operations.
- 1931** Protected in South Australia.
- 1935** Internationally protected by the League of Nations.
- 1978** All whaling in Australian waters ceased, the last whaling station being Albany, Western Australia.
- 1995** Great Australian Bight Marine Park and whale sanctuary established, providing a haven to protect Southern Right Whales visiting Australian waters.











Life history of the whales

Researchers have been undertaking a comprehensive study of the whales at the Head of Bight since 1991, photographing individuals, recording behaviour, mapping distribution, and gradually building up a picture of how the whales use the area. The unique markings (callosities) on the heads of the whales are used to identify individuals, enabling scientists to resight them in subsequent years or other places.

Through photo identification, researchers have been able to determine how often the whales visit the Great Australian Bight Marine Park. They have been able to work out factors such as how often the whales calve and the age at which they start to breed. This is an enormous benefit for conservation and can only be obtained through long term research projects.

The adjacent table shows examples of whale callosity patterns, the associated sketches which are used to identify individuals and the life history data for each of these whales. From this information you can see that cows breed approximately every three years and females are sexually mature at approximately six years.

Identifying marks		Life history at Head of Bight	
<p>Blaze Adult female</p>  	<p>1991 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1992 adult without calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1993 not present</p> <p>1994 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1995-96 not present</p>	<p>1997 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1998-99 not present</p> <p>2000 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>2001 not present</p> <p>2002 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>2003-04 not present</p> <p>2005 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p>	
<p>Chip Adult male</p>  	<p>1991 adult (Coorong, SA)</p> <p>1992 not present</p> <p>1993 adult (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1994 adult (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1995-97 not present</p>	<p>1998 adult (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1999-02 not present</p> <p>2003 adult (Head of Bight)</p> <p>2004-05 not present</p>	
<p>Michelin Man Male born at Head of Bight</p>  	<p>1991 calf (born at Head of Bight)</p> <p>1992 1 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1993 2 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1994 3 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1995 4 year old (Yokinup Bay, WA)</p> <p>1996 5 year old (Pt Ann, WA)</p>	<p>1997 6 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1998 7 year old (Dillon Bay, WA)</p> <p>1999 not present</p> <p>2000 9 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>2001-05 not present</p>	
<p>Ned Female born at Head of Bight</p>  	<p>1991 calf (born at Head of Bight)</p> <p>1992 1 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1993 not present</p> <p>1994 3 year old (Albany, WA)</p> <p>1995 4 year old (Head of Bight)</p> <p>1996-98 not present</p>	<p>1999 cow (8 years old) with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>2000-01 not present</p> <p>2002 cow (11 years old) with calf (Head of Bight)</p> <p>2003-04 not present</p> <p>2005 cow with calf (Head of Bight)</p>	

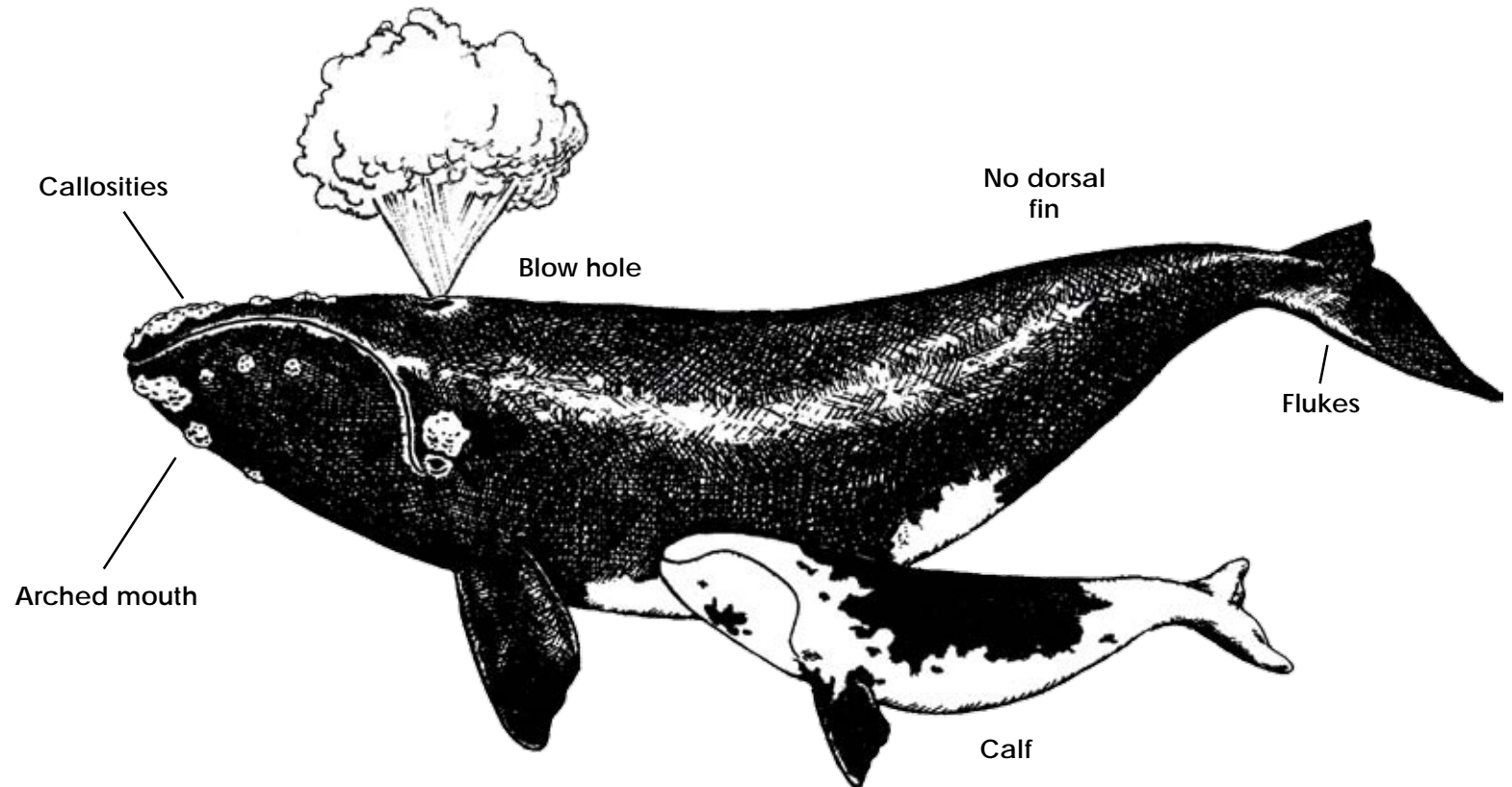


Identifying Southern Right Whales

Southern Right Whales can easily be distinguished from other whales by their 'v' shaped blow, callosities on their head and no dorsal fin.

What are callosities?

Callosities are thick patches of hardened skin called chitin which are covered in "whale lice".



Indigenous story

Aboriginal peoples along the South Australian coast have featured whales in their dreaming stories for generations. The story of Kondole the whale is one example.

One hot day, many Aborigines gathered at Encounter Bay for a large ceremony. The participants wanted to hold the ceremony through the night, but they did not possess any fire to enable them to see at night. Two messengers were sent to find Kondole, a large and powerful man who owned fire. Kondole, was only invited to the ceremony for his fire.

Kondole hid his fire, however, and thus infuriated the other participants. They determined to obtain the fire by force, but no-one dared approach him.

Finally Rilballe decided to wound him with a spear and take the fire from him. Rilballe threw the spear and wounded Kondole in the neck. The participants laughed and shouted after this and most were then changed into different animals. Kondole ran into the sea and became a whale, and now blows water out of the wound in his neck.



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Further reading:

Park brochure "Information for park users"
and "An Introduction"

www.environment.sa.gov.au/coasts/gabmp
www.deh.gov.au/coasts/mpa/gab

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