

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

HUMPBACK WHALE

Megaptera novaeangliae

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Northern Territory: Least Concern



Photo: P & M Nicholas. Lochman Transparencies

Description

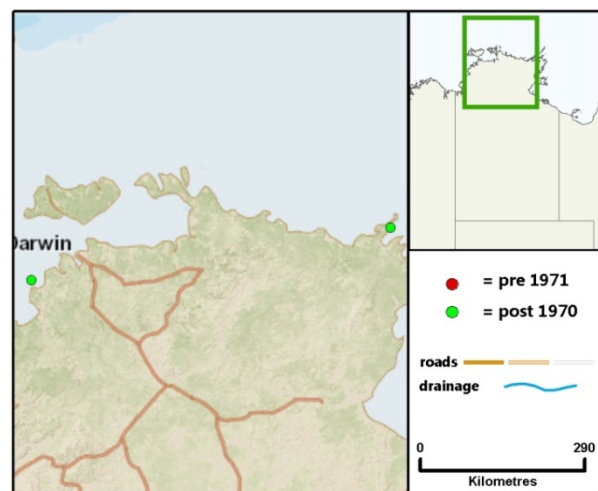
The humpback whale is a large (body length of 15-18 m) whale, with extremely long flippers and tubercles on head and lower jaw. It is black above and white, black or mottled below. It frequently raises the flukes when it dives (Reeves *et al.* 2002), revealing the distinctive 'serrated' tailing edge.

Distribution

The humpback whale occurs in all major oceans, mostly in coastal and continental shelf waters (Reeves *et al.* 2002). There are two main populations in Australian waters, that migrate along the east coast and west coast.

In the Northern Territory (NT), it is known from one beach-washed specimen on the Napier Peninsula, north-eastern Arnhem Land, in 1981 (Chatto and Warnecke 2000). Recent records suggest a more regular southward migration each year around October along the western NT coast (R. Chatto *pers.comm.*): this has included two individuals (mother and calf) seen off Casuarina and the Perron Islands, September-October 2002 (R. Chatto *pers. comm.*).

Conservation reserves where reported:
None



Known locations of the humpback whale

Ecology

The humpback whale breeds in warm waters at low latitudes, and migrates in summer to higher latitudes. Females have one calf every two to three years. Humpback whales are usually solitary, but may form small unstable groups, and males may aggregate around females. Humpback whales feed on krill and small schooling fish.

Conservation assessment

Humpback whales were a preferred target species for hunting, and numbers are estimated to have declined by 95 per cent in the nineteenth and twentieth century (DEH 2005). The current population is estimated at between 8 000 and 14 000 on the Australian

west coast and between 3 000 and 4 000 on the east coast (DEH 2005). These populations are reported to be now increasing (DEH 2005).

In the NT, the number of recorded sightings has increased substantially in the last seven to ten years. Humpback whales (singles or small groups, often including calves) are now seen in waters off the NT (typically between the Tiwi Islands and the Western Australia border) each year, usually between August and October (R. Chatto, *pers. comm.*). This increase in records appears to be related to humpback whales from the WA stocks using the Kimberley coast more in their southward migration, consequently coming into NT waters. It is not clear whether they are calving within NT waters.

Threatening processes

The main threat to the humpback whale is the legacy of previous hunting, and current and future proposed hunting. It may also be affected by habitat degradation, including reduction in food supplies, and climate change (DEH 2005).

Conservation objectives and management

National conservation and management objectives are detailed in a national recovery plan (DEH 2005). The main NT priority is to improve knowledge of the distribution, status and habitat requirements of this species, and other whales, in NT waters.

Complied by

John Woinarski

Ray Chatto

Simon Ward

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References

- Chatto, R., and Warnecke, R.M. (2000). Records of cetacean strandings in the Northern Territory of Australia. *The Beagle* **16**, 163-175.
- DEH (2005). *Humpback whale recovery plan, 2005-2010*. (Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra.)
- Reeves, R.R., Stewart, B.S., Clapham, P.J., and Powell, J.A. (2002). *Sea mammals of the world*. (A. & C. Black, London.)