

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

BLUE WHALE

Balaenoptera musculus

Conservation status

Australia: Endangered

Northern Territory: Data Deficient



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Description

The blue whale is the largest animal known, with a body length of 25-30 m. It is a mottled blue-grey in colour; has a very small dorsal fin, set far back in the body; and (like other baleen whales) prominent throat pleats.

Distribution

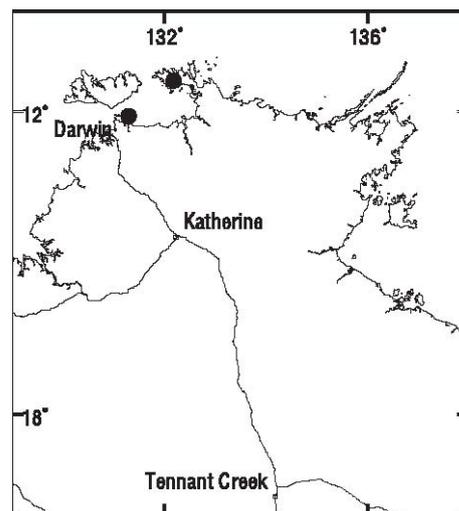
The blue whale occurs in all oceans and inhabits coastal, shelf and oceanic waters (Reeves *et al.* 2002). In the NT, it is known from two beach-washed specimens, at Cape Hotham in 1980 (Chatto and Warnecke 2000), and at Port Essington in August 2003 (R. Chatto *pers. comm.*)

Conservation reserves where reported:

Cape Hotham Conservation Reserve, Garig Gunak Barlu National Park (but both only as single beach-washed records).

Ecology

The blue whale breeds in warm waters at low latitudes, and migrates to summer in higher latitudes. Females have one calf every 2-3 years. Blue whales are usually solitary, but may form small short-lived groups. Blue whales feed almost exclusively on krill. Blue whales may live for 90 years or more.



Known locations of the blue whale
● = post 1970

Conservation assessment

Blue whales were a preferred target species for hunting, and numbers in the Southern Hemisphere are estimated to have declined from more than 300,000 to between 500 and 2300 (DEH 2005).

In the NT, there are too few records to assess status. A decline in the NT may be inferred from the world-wide decline, but NT waters may have always been marginal for this species.

Threatening processes

The main threat to the blue 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

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References

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- DEH (2005). *Blue, fin and sei 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.)