

When are whales euthanased?

DEC wildlife officers, with the assistance of qualified vets, always carry out a clinical assessment of sick or injured whales before deciding on the best course of action in each case. Some beached whales die within hours while others may take many days. Euthanasia may be the most appropriate course of action available. The euthanasia technique used is largely determined by the animal's size and location. Generally, a suitable calibre firearm is the most humane and effective method for smaller animals while the focused implosion method, which involves explosives, is the safest and most effective method for larger animals. This method, which is internationally recognised, has been developed and refined over 20 years and results in an instantaneous death while managing risk to the public and staff involved.

Can I help the wildlife officers?

Safety is a primary consideration at strandings. Whales can roll onto people in the water near them, so we ask that you maintain a safe distance from any animals and follow the instructions of DEC staff. Whales and dolphins are powerful animals and can cause serious injuries. They may also carry zoonotic diseases. It is important that members of the public do not attempt to push stranded animals back out to sea as experience has shown that they will re-strand, causing severe stress, injury and death. Volunteers are always needed and are welcome to assist during mass stranding rescues. Volunteers must be registered and follow the directions of DEC staff.

What happens with mass strandings?

The largest mass stranding of whales dealt with in WA occurred in 1996 in Dunsborough. It involved 320 long-finned pilot whales. All but 20 animals survived in this case, however, multiple factors at play including location and weather can affect the survival rate. DEC's incident control system provides a clear reporting structure and well defined roles that have been very effective since it was first applied to a mass stranding at Augusta in 1986. During a rescue first aid is provided to whales, such as keeping the blow hole clear and keeping their skin wet and cool, while plans are made to return the animals to the sea. This may involve transporting whales to safe holding areas where they are treated to counter the effects of being stranded. When wildlife officers carry out rescues, they develop a strategy to deal with the prevailing conditions and take great care to carry the animals gently in slings to minimise distress and prevent damage to tissue and internal organs. Once they are ready to be released they are guided out to sea using boats. The reason why these mass strandings occur is still unknown. There are many theories including the shape of the coastline being a contributing factor, whales responding to distress calls from other whales, or groups following a leader into shore.

Who do I call if I see a stranded whale or dolphin?

To report a stranding, entanglement or a marine mammal in distress, please call **DEC's Wildcare Helpline on 9474 9055**.

To find out more visit www.dec.wa.gov.au

What to do:

1. Think about your safety first.
2. Call the **Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055** – an available officer will arrive at the earliest opportunity.
3. While waiting for assistance, try not to make much noise.
4. Keep the animal's skin moist with buckets of water where possible.
5. Listen to the instructions of the wildlife officer.

What NOT to do:

1. **DO NOT** put your safety or the safety of others at risk.
2. **DO NOT** stand close to the tail or head.
3. **DO NOT** touch the animal more than necessary – do not push or pull on the flippers, flukes or head, or cover the blowhole.
4. **DO NOT** attempt to push the animal back out to sea – this will only add to its suffering.
5. **DO NOT** apply sunscreen even if the animal's skin is burnt.

Whale and dolphin strandings

Southern right whale



To report a stranding call the
Wildcare Helpline on
9474 9055

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Please dispose of this brochure responsibly

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Department of
Environment and Conservation



Southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*)



Photo – D K Coughran

Southern right whales can often be seen by boaters, or sightseers watching from vantage points on land each year from about June to October. Southern right whales are about the size of a bus. They weigh up to 80 tonnes and may reach 18 metres long. They also have the largest testes and penises of any living thing, with penises longer than 14 per cent of their body length and testes that weigh as much as one tonne. Although southern right whales are huge, bulky creatures, they are also agile and active animals, and their acrobatic antics can keep whale watchers amazed and entranced for hours. However, their commonest behaviour is lying around like logs at the surface.

Description: These mammals have horny growths called callosities on the top of the head, behind the blowholes, on the chin, above the eyes and on the lower lip. Although their exact function is unknown, both males and females have callosities, which may be a form of armour plating used in defence and rough body contact. Southern right whales harbour large quantities of parasites (small crustaceans known as whale lice), and the callosities may serve to reduce the area of the body which parasites can inhabit. The patterns formed by the callosities are different for each individual, and this has proven useful for researchers collecting information on patterns of movement and behaviour. Southern right whales are large and stocky. The head is large – up to a quarter of the total body length – and the lower jawline is distinctively bowed. There is no dorsal fin. The flippers are broad, triangular and flat and the body colour ranges from blue-black to light brown. There are often white markings, usually on the belly. The twin blowholes produce a high, V-shaped blow.

Status and Distribution: Southern right whales inhabit the cooler latitudes, where they were once abundant. These gentle giants were sought after by whalers for their oil and baleen. In fact, they were called right whales because in the days of open-boat whaling with hand harpoons they were the 'right' ones to catch. They were slow-swimming, floated when dead, and yielded large amounts of valuable products – particularly oil for illumination and lubrication. More than 100,000 were caught in the nineteenth century alone. Populations declined to dangerously low levels even before the end of the nineteenth century. It is estimated that the entire world population of southern right whales only numbers

several thousand, compared to an original population before whaling of more than 100,000. Recent estimates have put the population along the southern coast of Australia at only about 1,500 individuals. They are thought to be recovering at a rate of about seven per cent each year, and are once again becoming a spectacle along our coastline. They are listed as threatened.

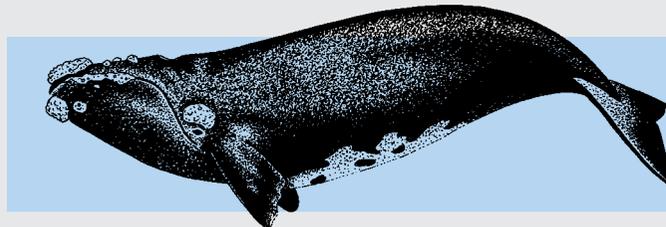
Life history: Southern right whales regularly engage in tail lobbing, flipper slapping and even head standing. After they breach, the sound of these mammoth acrobats hitting the water can be heard from a great distance. They are usually seen in mother and calf pairs, but occasionally congregate in groups of up to 20. The mammals may moan.

Feeding: Southern right whales are baleen whales, which means they have horny plates of baleen hanging down from their upper jaws. They sieve swarms of plankton from the water through the fibrous inner hairs of the baleen plates. Most feeding is thought to occur in the highly productive polar areas during summer, but they do not move as far south as humpbacks or other baleen whales.

Breeding: During summer, southern right whales prefer the open ocean, away from the coast, but during early winter and spring the cows come in close to shore. There, near the surf line in sheltered bays, they give birth to their young, before returning to deeper waters as summer approaches. On average, they calve once every three years. Newborn animals are between 4.5 to six metres long and weigh approximately one and a half tonnes.

Strandings: People often mistakenly believe southern right whales are stranding when they come in close to shore. However, they sometimes become entangled in nets and ropes along the WA coast, such as in Cockburn Sound in August 1992 and Warnbro Sound in August 1994.

Where to see them: Regular whale watching tours that encounter southern right whales operate from Albany, Augusta, Dunsborough and Esperance in season. They can also be seen from vantage points along the shore such as on the Leeuwin-Naturaliste coast between Busselton and Augusta and Point Ann east of Bremer Bay in the Fitzgerald River National Park. From time to time during the winter months, people in the Perth metropolitan area can easily see them from shore, especially in the Marmion Marine Park.



Frequently asked questions

Strandings in Western Australia

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is responsible for wildlife conservation in WA and DEC officers are usually the first people called to a marine mammal stranding. DEC wildlife officers have gained vast experience with strandings over the years and are highly respected in Australia and internationally, regularly exchanging advice and information through networks and workshops. DEC also works closely with local authorities, volunteers and service providers during stranding incidents.

Which whales and dolphins live in Western Australian waters?

A total of 35 cetacean (whale and dolphin) species have been recorded in WA waters, which is more than 80 per cent of the 43 species found in or close to Australia. Humpback whales are among the most frequently sighted great whales in WA waters. Their annual 13,000 kilometre migration takes them from Antarctica to the warmer waters off the state's northwest to breed and give birth from May to June and they return with their new calves by December. The west coast humpback population, once hunted to near extinction, is currently estimated at more than 22,000 and is recognised as one of the most successful populations in the world to recover from whaling.

Southern right whales are a much anticipated in-shore visitor, although only few more than 2000 individuals visit Australia during their breeding season on the south coast to give birth and nurse their calves. Some of them move up the west coast, as far north as North West Cape, and may be seen close to shore, just behind the breakers, which can lead people to mistakenly believe they are about to strand. Other marine mammals that we are fortunate to encounter include bottlenose dolphins, blue whales, long-finned pilot whales and false killer whales.

What happens when a marine mammal strands?

Strandings of marine mammals – many of them single animals – occur much more frequently than most people realise along the extensive coastline of WA. Not all strandings are reported as they often happen in remote and unpopulated areas. There are many successful rescue stories involving toothed whales and dolphins of small to medium size. However there are also many sad cases when rescue is not possible and in most instances, particularly involving baleen whales such as humpbacks, the animals will only come ashore when they are very sick or dying. There is little wildlife officers can do to help stranded humpbacks as these whales can weigh in excess of 40,000 kilograms and they are too big to move without causing severe damage and injury. Intervention in these situations represents a serious risk and DEC's most important priority is to the safety of the public and staff. The death of beached baleen whales can take many days and DEC must determine if the provision of palliative care to allow the whale to die naturally or euthanasia to end the animal's suffering is in the animal's best interests.