

### 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](http://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

## Sperm 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



# Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)



Photo – Tony Wu/Marinethemes.com

Sperm whales are truly majestic animals. They are the largest of the toothed whales and can grow to more than 18 metres and weigh up to 60 tonnes. The name *macrocephalus* means 'big head', which is indeed appropriate since the head is a quarter of the body length in calves and, with age, may form more than a third of the length of the body. The common name of the sperm whale originated because whalers thought the liquid substance in its head resembled the fluid produced by the testes. This may be an important aid in the whale's ability to dive to tremendous depths. It has been surmised that the sperm whale may be able to change the density of the spermaceti and therefore control the buoyancy of its body. These large animals are found close to the mainland in the Albany area, which was the reason for the existence of the former Cheyne Beach Whaling Station at Albany.

**Description:** Sperm whales are easily recognised by the rectangular head shown in drawings of Moby Dick. The cylindrical lower jaws contain rows of huge teeth that may weigh more than a kilogram each. They have dark grey or dark brown bodies. The heads of males may be heavily scarred as a result of fights with other bulls or with giant squid, which they eat. The average length of this species is 15 metres in males and 11 metres in females. The flippers are short and stubby but the tail is large and powerful and the tail flukes are triangular in shape. Sperm whales have bushy, five-metre-high blows. The blowhole is on the left of the head and the blow is lopsided and projects forward.

**Status and distribution:** The sperm whale ranges from the Equator to the North and South poles in waters at least 180 metres deep. These whales were hunted for their oil and spermaceti. Ambergris, a fragrant waxy substance in the gut that forms around squid beaks, was used in the perfume industry. Despite being exploited for more than 300 years, the sperm whale remains reasonably abundant.

**Life history:** Sperm whales are among the longest and deepest divers of all whales and dolphins, only matched by the beaked whales. Dives may last more than 60 minutes and be to depths of 2,800 metres, possibly deeper. They often raise their tail flukes before diving. They are oceanic and are rarely seen near shore, unless sick. In their seasonal movements, between the colder areas in summer and warmer zones in winter, they may travel for thousands of kilometres. Females and their offspring live in family groups of between 10 and 20 animals, within which they usually spend their whole lives. Adult males live in separate 'bachelor pods'. Groups of hundreds have been seen. They vocalise in clicks. Certain click sequences, known as codas, have been recorded and these probably convey messages to other whales.

**Breeding:** This species is long-lived and reproduces at an extremely low rate. Females become sexually mature at between eight and 11 years of age. They calve after a lengthy gestation period (14 to 15.5 months) at intervals of between three and 15 years. The calves are about four metres at birth. They begin to eat solids in their first year but may continue to suckle until about 10 years of age. The bulls have to compete for access to females and may have to wait until they are more than 20 years of age before they can mate. Stories from whalers tell of great fights between bulls, sometimes resulting in severe injuries. The bulls continue to get bigger and more solitary in their habits as they age.

**Feeding:** Sperm whales feed all year round on squid, octopuses and sometimes fish and may hunt in lines. Food is taken in mid-water, usually below 400 metres, and the whales may also feed on the bottom. As no sunlight can penetrate these depths, they are thought to locate their food by echolocation.



Photo – Mark Carwardine/Oceanwideimages.com

## 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.