



WHAT IS A BALEEN WHALE?

WHALES CAN BE DIVIDED INTO 2 GROUPS DEPENDING ON WHAT THEY EAT – toothed and baleen whales. In the South Pacific region, there are 6 baleen species (blue, fin, sei, humpback, Bryde's and minke whales).

Baleen whales do not have any teeth. Instead, baleen is the name given to the comb-like plates that hang from the whale's upper jaw and is used as a large filter to collect small marine animals called 'krill' from the seawater.

BALEEN IS MADE OF KERATIN, WHICH IS A PROTEIN FOUND IN OUR FINGERNAILS AND THE CLAWS AND HOOVES OF MAMMALS.

Baleen whales feed by swallowing large mouthfuls of seawater and krill and then using their tongues to push out the water against the baleen, trapping the small krill inside their mouths.



Picture courtesy Museum of Victoria

BALEEN WHALES HAVE DIFFERENT BALEEN PLATE SHAPES DEPENDING ON THE WHALE SPECIES. PICTURED ARE A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT EXAMPLES OF BALEEN.



BALEEN WHALES MIGRATE

great distances from their feeding grounds in colder, southern waters to warm shallow waters to mate and breed. Bryde's whales are the exception. They remain in temperate and tropical waters throughout their lives though like the other baleen whales, Bryde's whales also feed mainly on small crustaceans, like krill.



WHAT IS KRILL?

Krill is the general term used to describe a number of species of small shrimp-like crustaceans found in all the oceans of the world.



THEY USUALLY MEASURE 1-2 CENTIMETRES IN LENGTH AND CAN FORM DENSE SWARMS MADE UP OF MILLIONS OF INDIVIDUALS. THESE SWARMS LOOK LIKE RED/ORANGE CLOUDS IN THE OCEAN.

KRILL ARE A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF THE MARINE FOOD WEB. *They feed on plankton and are themselves eaten by marine species such as whales, seals, squid, penguins, albatrosses and other bird species.*

Krill mostly spend their daytime at greater depths in the ocean and rise to the surface at night. Some species however, form swarms near the surface during the day to feed or mate.

THE LARGE KRILL SWARMS OF THE ANTARCTIC SUMMER ATTRACT WHALES AND OTHER MARINE SPECIES TO THE SOUTHERN OCEAN TO FEED WHEN THE KRILL IS AT ITS HIGHEST CONCENTRATIONS. AT OTHER TIMES OF THE YEAR, KRILL IS SCATTERED AND HARDER TO FIND.

The baleen whales that migrate to the South Pacific region in the winter months, such as the humpback whale, return to the Antarctic each summer to feed on krill.



SOME QUICK SOUTH PACIFIC WHALE FACTS AND FICTION

The blue whale is the largest animal to live on earth measuring up to 33 metres in length.

In comparison, Hector's Dolphin, a New Zealand species measures up to only 1.4 metres.

Sperm whales are the largest toothed whale and feed mainly on deep sea squid.

Large baleen whales generally do not eat fish, especially large commercial species such as tuna.

Whales, tuna and other commercially important fish are not competitors but are part of a very complex marine food web that is difficult to fully understand. Removing parts of the food web could have serious consequences for all marine species.

BALEEN WHALES CAN LIVE FROM 50 TO 100 YEARS. THEY GIVE BIRTH EVERY 2-3 YEARS TO ONE CALF AND THIS MAKES THEM VERY SLOW TO INCREASE THEIR POPULATIONS.

Commercial whaling reduced some large whale species to less than 10% of their pre-whaling populations. Though whaling in South Pacific waters did not occur until late in whaling history, the populations of whales that migrate to the region were hunted in their feeding grounds around Antarctica.

WHALES TRAVEL VAST DISTANCES BETWEEN THEIR FEEDING AND BREEDING GROUNDS. THE THICK LAYER OF FAT CALLED BLUBBER IS BUILT UP DURING THE FEEDING SEASON TO SUSTAIN THE WHALE BECAUSE THEY GENERALLY DON'T FEED WHEN THEY ARE MIGRATING, MATING OR BREEDING.



The humpback whales we see in the South Pacific travel thousands of kilometres to these warm waters each winter to breed and then return to Antarctic waters to feed on krill.