



FACT SHEET

WHY WHALES DON'T THREATEN FISH IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Fisheries are important to many South Pacific economies, which rely on abundant supplies of fish. But it is over-fishing, not whales, which is the major threat to fish stocks. Around the world, continued over-fishing does not allow stocks to replenish naturally.

WHALES HAVE DIFFERENT TASTES

Great whales do not eat tuna or other commercially important species, nor do they compete with them directly for food.

Most great whales in the South Pacific are baleen whales, which means they do not have teeth. Blue, southern right, humpback and minke whales are all filter feeders, feeding on plankton and Antarctic krill and fasting during migration and on breeding grounds in the South Pacific.

Some whales, including sperm, Bryde's and minke, feed on small quantities of fish and squid species not commercially exploited.

SUSTAINABLE FISHING

The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation recently found that 35 per cent of 200 major fish resources are over fished and 25 per cent are being fished to their limit.

Studies show that fishing needs to be reduced by up to 50 per cent to return world fisheries to a sustainable level.

There is no conclusive evidence showing whales are impacting on fishery yields. Most populations of great whales in the South Pacific are today a small fraction of their pre-exploitation levels, due to unregulated whaling over the past 200 years.

The argument suggesting these comparatively small whale populations could impact on today's fish resources can be dismissed. There are far more effective ways to increase world fish stocks than by killing whales, such as by ensuring fishing levels are sustainable, increasing age at first capture, increasing net mesh sizes and restricting access to areas important to juvenile fish.

SOUTH PACIFIC BREEDING WATERS NOT FEEDING GROUNDS

Most great whales feed in Antarctic waters, within the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. Whales migrate to the warmer waters of the South Pacific to mate, calve and rear their young. They fast during this time and generally do not feed when migrating to these warmer waters.

By the time they return to the Southern Ocean, they have lost much of their body condition and this is why whalers preferred to catch whales on their northward migration or in their feeding grounds, rather than on their southward migration.

NOT A THREAT – UNDER THREAT

The only populations in the South Pacific to have shown any increase in numbers in the past 10 years are the Australian humpback and southern right whales, both of which are still severely depleted. These species feed only in Antarctic and sub-Antarctic waters.

In June 2000 the scientific committee of the IWC found that for the most abundant species, the Southern Hemisphere minke whale, population estimates were appreciably lower than earlier estimates. Information on other populations is too scarce to make reliable estimates of numbers.