(DOC, 2006)

1978

# Whales in New Zealand

## Marine life

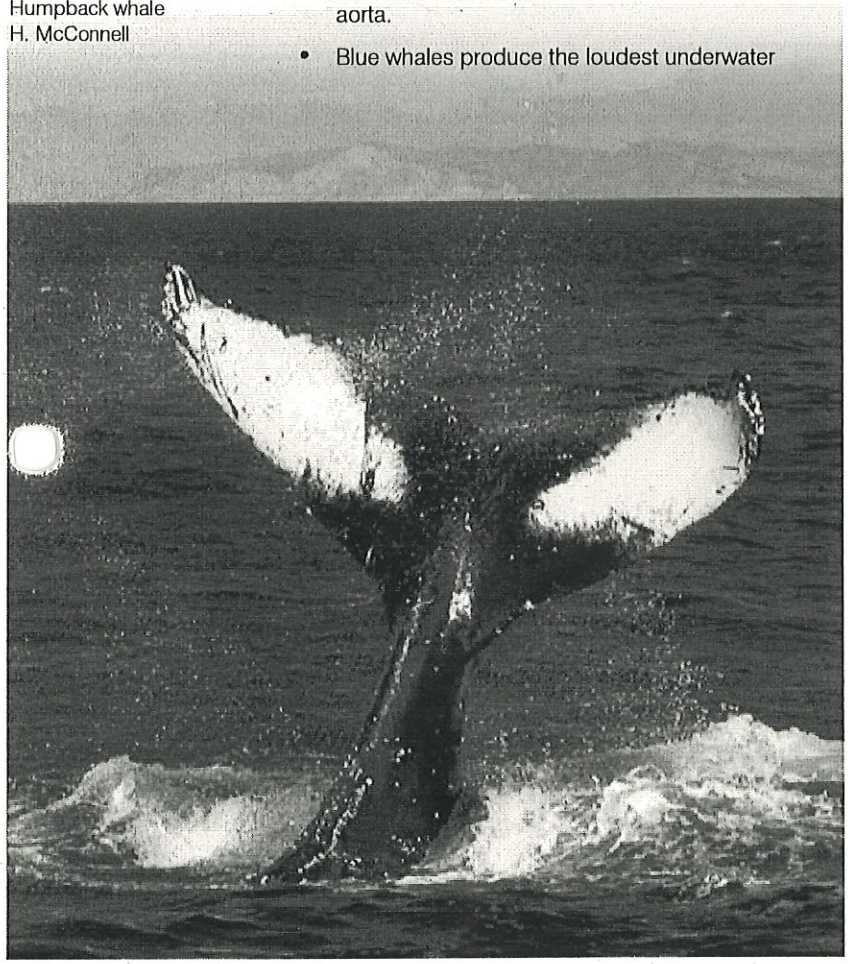
Gargantuan yet graceful in their watery world, whales have excited the emotions and imagination of people for centuries. The world's largest mammals, there are at least 80 species of whale, of which 30 are seen around New Zealand's coast. Many of them are on seasonal journeys between breeding grounds in temperate or sub-tropical areas and the rich feeding grounds of Antarctica.

In the past, many whale species were driven to the brink of extinction by commercial hunting. Whales are now protected within New Zealand's 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone under the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978.

### Fascinating whale facts

- The right whale is one of the world's rarest mammals. This 15 metre, 55 tonne whale was so-named by whalers because it was easy to catch, floated when dead, and yielded large quantities of both oil and bone.
- Weighing in at up to 150 tonnes, the blue whale is the largest animal in the world – bigger than any of the dinosaurs! A small child can crawl through its aorta.
- Blue whales produce the loudest underwater sound –188 decibels, louder than a jumbo jet taking off.
- Large whales like the sperm whale take up to 10 years to become sexually mature, and can live for up to 60 years.
- Sperm whales, which feed on deepwater squid, can dive down to depths of 1000 m and stay underwater for one and a half hours.
- Male humpbacks sing one of the animal kingdom's longest and most complex songs during the breeding season.

Humpback whale
H. McConnell



### Whales and people

The migration stories of many Māori tribes feature whales, considered a 'chiefly fish' by Māori, a descendant of Tangaroa god of the oceans, a symbol of bounty and a special taonga (treasure). One legend highlighted in the acclaimed New Zealand film 'Whale Rider' tells of a tribal ancestor Paikea travelling to New Zealand on the back of a mighty whale. Stranded whales were traditionally an important source of food. Whale bone and teeth were used to make highly prized implements, weapons and ornaments, a custom which continues today.

Whalers and sealers were among the first Europeans to arrive in New Zealand, with the first shore-based whaling stations established in the late 1820s. At its peak in 1839, 200 whaling ships were working our coastal waters. Whaling quickly declined as numbers of whales dropped – some, like the right whale, almost became extinct in the southern hemisphere. The last whale was harpooned in New Zealand waters in 1963.

Whale watching is an expanding tourist industry grossing over $700 million world-wide, earning New Zealand around $120 million in 2004. About 80,000 people view sperm whales at Kaikoura, on the South Island's east coast each year. New Zealand's Marine Mammals Protection Regulations 1992 help safeguard whales from the impacts of the growing tourism industry.

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Department of Conservation
*Te Papa Atawhai*

## New Zealand's whales

### Southern right whale / tohora

Southern right whales can come very close to shore. Up to 15 metres long, they are mostly black in colour and are easily identified by their lack of a dorsal fin, a V-shaped blowhole spray and white growths on their heads called callosities.
The whales that visit New Zealand's mainland may be a separate population to those found in Sub-antarctic waters. If so, it would make the right whales of New Zealand extremely rare.

### Humpback whale / paikea

Humpback whales pass through New Zealand waters between summer feeding grounds in the Antarctic and winter breeding grounds in sub-tropical waters. They have a stocky body with a broad round head and extremely long pectoral flippers. Humpbacks are spectacular jumpers, and can leap clear of the water in a behaviour called 'breaching'.

### Beaked whales / hakura

There is not much known about beaked whales as they are inconspicuous at sea, spending much of their time at depths. However, the number of beaked whale strandings in the past indicates that New Zealand is a global stronghold of diversity, with 12 beaked whale species recorded in our waters.

### Other baleen whales

These include the blue whale, fin whale, sei whale, minke whale, pygmy blue whale and pygmy right whale. Little is known about these species in New Zealand waters, but they are generally through to be migrants around our coasts. Bryde's whales are resident in some northern areas of New Zealand.

## What is being done?

New Zealand is recognised as a world leader in marine mammal protection.
In 1946 New Zealand was one of the founding members of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), established to manage the world's whale resources. In 1982 the IWC voted for a moratorium on commercial whaling and in 1994 established the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary. New Zealand and Australia have also proposed a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary, which together with the Southern Sanctuary would protect our whales during their entire life cycles, from feeding in the Antarctic to breeding in the tropics.

New Zealand is also at the forefront of whale rescue work. The Department of Conservation manages whale strandings and rescues, with the help of local communities, iwi groups, NGOs and volunteers.
The Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa has been collecting information from strandings since 1895 and now maintains the database for DOC. More than 12,000animals are recorded in this database.

DOC is collecting information to confirm whether the New Zealand mainland population of southern right whales is geographically and/or genetically distinct from the more numerous sub-Antarctic population. Please call the DOC Hotline immediately if you see a southern right whale.

## How can you help?

- Plastic bags and other rubbish are often accidentally eaten by whales and can cause death. Take rubbish home with you and pick up any plastic that you see floating at sea or on the beach.
- Substances that you pour down the drain or into the gutter end up in the oceans – Don't pour harmful chemicals down the drain.
- Join Project Jonah or a local group to learn how to rescue stranded whales or join a group which helps with beach clean-ups.
- If you see a Southern right whale please report it to DOC immediately. Call the 0800 DOCHOT line, 0800 36 24 68. If you can, photograph the whales as this helps to identify individuals. The most useful shots are of the left side of the head and the full length of the body.
- Boats that encounter whales should observe the following;

  Maintain a distance of 50 m from whales.

  Operate your boat slowly and quietly at "no wake" speed and quietly.

  If a whale approaches your boat, slow down and stop.

  Manoeuvre your boat sensitively near whales. Do not obstruct their path, cut through a group or separate mothers from calves.

  Avoid sudden noises that could startle the animals.

  Co-operate with others so all may see whales without putting them at risk.
- If you find a stranded whale, Contact your nearest DOC office or police station as soon as possible. DOC has a 24 hour emergency call out number 0800 DOCHOT line, 0800 36 24 68.

## For more information

Visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz
Further reading
Baker, Alan. 1990: *Whales and Dolphins of New Zealand and Australia*. Victoria University Press, Wellington.