



Defending our oceans

"Greenpeace is committed to defending the health of the world's oceans and the plants, animals and people that depend upon them."

Sperm whales - deep sea leviathans



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Of all the creatures of the deep ocean, the sperm whale probably enjoys most legendary status. Immortalised in *Moby Dick*, they are a far cry from the vengeful creature that tormented Captain Ahab and his crew. Quite the reverse. It was the whaling ships of the 19th and 20th centuries that persecuted them. They were much prized for their valuable oil - in the southern hemisphere alone, 400,000 were killed in the 20th century. No commercial hunting of sperm whales has been permitted by the International Whaling Commission since the global moratorium on commercial whaling came into effect in 1986.

Today it is impossible to get an accurate global picture of how many survive. The very nature of the beasts makes them hard to monitor. Sperm whales can dive down as much as a kilometer, feeding on the delicacies of the deep, such as giant squid and deep-sea fish that are rarely seen by humans. Although they may return to the same areas each year, sperm whales set up no permanent home and where they are found is dependent upon many factors. Females, mothers and young make their homes in tropical and temperate waters. As the young males begin to mature they leave the family group for higher latitudes, and much like any teenager, head off to hang out in bachelor gangs in the summer months. Sperm whales reach sexual maturity at around 25, when they head back to the temperate, tropical waters to mate. Calves are born every 3-6 years after a whopping 15 months pregnancy.

It is the slowness of their reproduction that makes it so hard for them to recover from exploitation. One recent estimate of world-wide sperm whale numbers - by eminent

scientist Hal Whitehead - set the total at around 360,000, far short of the frequently quoted one or two million. The only certainty is that after over a century of whaling their numbers are far from recovered since the ban was enforced.

Sperm whales, like all other whale species, are highly social creatures, they echolocate through a complex broadband clicking system and exchange what are thought to be socially significant messages through special patterns of clicks. While sociable in their own environment, sperm whales rarely come close to land, preferring the deep waters off the high seas. However, around the Atlantic islands of the Azores, the sheer drops from land to deep sea makes this area an ideal stop off point for feeding and raising their young.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) started a project to monitor sperm whales around the Azores in the late 1980's. Today the old whaling industry has been replaced by a thriving whale watching industry. The Azores is now a center for scientific research on sperm whales. IFAW has also developed special computer software to listen to the "songs" of the whales - their clicking system - in order to track and monitor them. Whales also have their own fingerprint - their tail or fluke. No two whales look the same and each pattern across the top of the fluke is unique. Photographing the flukes helps build up a picture of how the complex sperm whale society is operating in the area.

In 2000 the Fisheries Agency of Japan (FAJ) began hunting sperm whales in the North Pacific as part of its so called scientific whaling programme. Other threats to sperm whales elsewhere include collisions with ships and entanglement in fishing gear. In 2006 the FAJ will be pushing the International Whaling Commission to lift the ban on whaling. Greenpeace, IFAW and other groups will be campaigning to ensure that commercial whaling, however it is described, is stopped once and for all.

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Greenpeace is an independent, campaigning organisation, which uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems, and to force solutions essential to a green and peaceful future



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