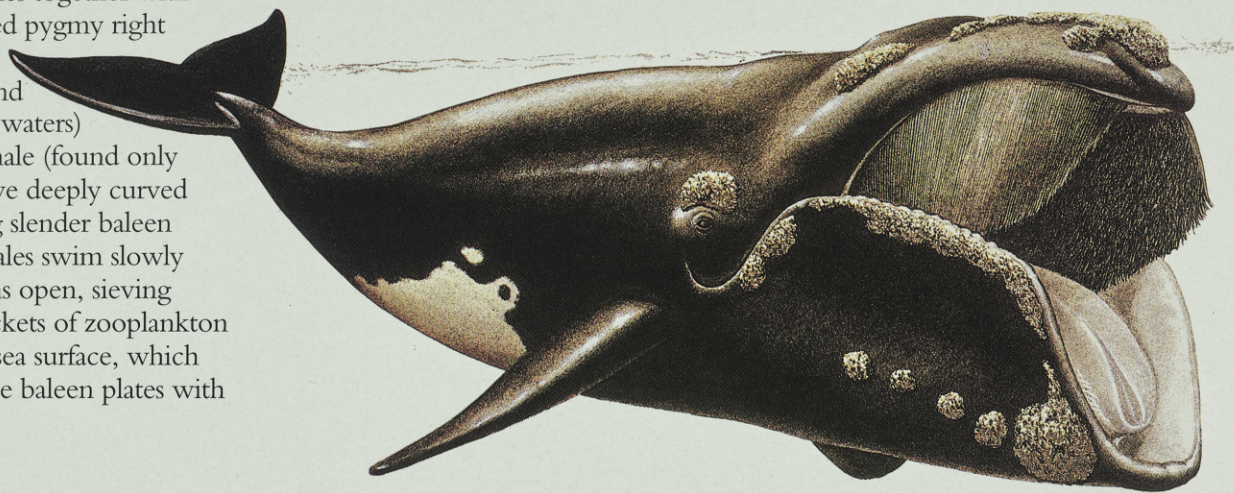


Southern right whale

Right whales together with the related pygmy right whale (also found in New Zealand waters) and bowhead whale (found only in the Arctic) have deeply curved jawlines and long slender baleen plates. Right whales swim slowly with their mouths open, sieving concentrated pockets of zooplankton on or under the sea surface, which they scrape off the baleen plates with their tongues.



Average adult length	15 metres
Average weight	50-56 tonnes
Colour	black; some individuals with large white patches
Distribution	all southern oceans from about 20°S to 55°S
Numbers	estimated 3,000

Royal New Zealand Airforce we were now able to confirm that breeding activity in this population lasted at least two months.

THE RIGHT WHALE belongs to that group of huge filter-feeders known as baleen whales. The baleens number 11 species and include the largest animal of all, the blue whale. There are now two species known as right whales, one for each hemisphere; the northern right whale, *Eubalaena glacialis*, and the southern right whale, *Eubalaena australis*. Right whales also form several distinct populations within each hemisphere. The north-east Atlantic and north-east Pacific stocks are on the verge of extinction, being represented by little more than a hundred individuals in each.

Stocks in the north-west Atlantic, north-west Pacific, south-west Australia and south-east Australia/New Zealand regions are estimated at several hundred animals each. South Africa and Argentine Patagonia are currently thought to support the world's largest stocks, in excess of 500 animals.

Classified as vulnerable, the world population is estimated at only about three percent of its pre-harvest level.

The right whale was so named because it swam slowly and close to shore, and was easily harpooned from row boats based at shore stations. Whales also floated when dead and yielded large amounts of premium quality oil and baleen.

Right whales were the first whales to

be hunted commercially, by the Basques of northern Spain, as early as the 12th century. By the 16th century the population was so depleted that whaling fleets set out to exploit new stocks around Newfoundland and Labrador, and, in the 17th century, around Spitsbergen and Greenland.

With the collapse of each stock the whalers looked to new grounds – off South Africa, Japan, Brazil, Peru and Chile, Australia and New Zealand – to keep Europe's whale-oil-powered street lamps burning. In south-east Australian and New Zealand waters at least 26,000 right whales were killed, mainly in the 1830s and 40s.

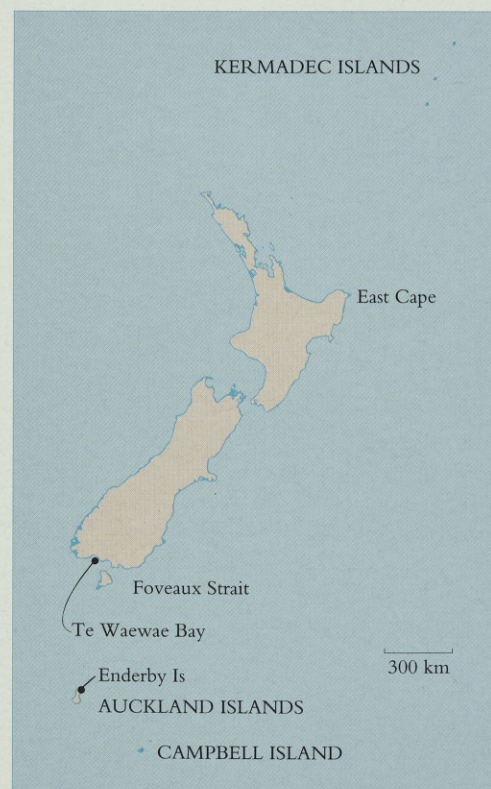
So complete was the destruction of this region's population that the first documented 20th century sighting of a right whale off the Australian coast was not until 1955.

Now, protected from commercial whaling since the 1930s, this great whale is starting to make a comeback, particularly the southern species.

Off Patagonia's Valdez Peninsula 900 individuals have been identified from photographs taken during aerial surveys over 20 years, nearly 500 of which have been identified in more than one season. Such data has been used to estimate that the population is increasing at a rate of 7.6 percent a year and that the average calving interval is 3.6 years.

Aerial surveys have also been made off the South African and Western Australian coasts for over a decade and populations there show similar trends.

A group of southern right whales off the South African coast. The activity here is probably associated with mating. ►



Found in New Zealand waters from the subantarctic to the Kermadec Islands, right whales appear to migrate northwards through the region during the colder months, the females traditionally moving into sheltered bays for calving and mating. Their sonar systems are suited to navigation in shallow bays and they rarely strand.