Recognising your whale

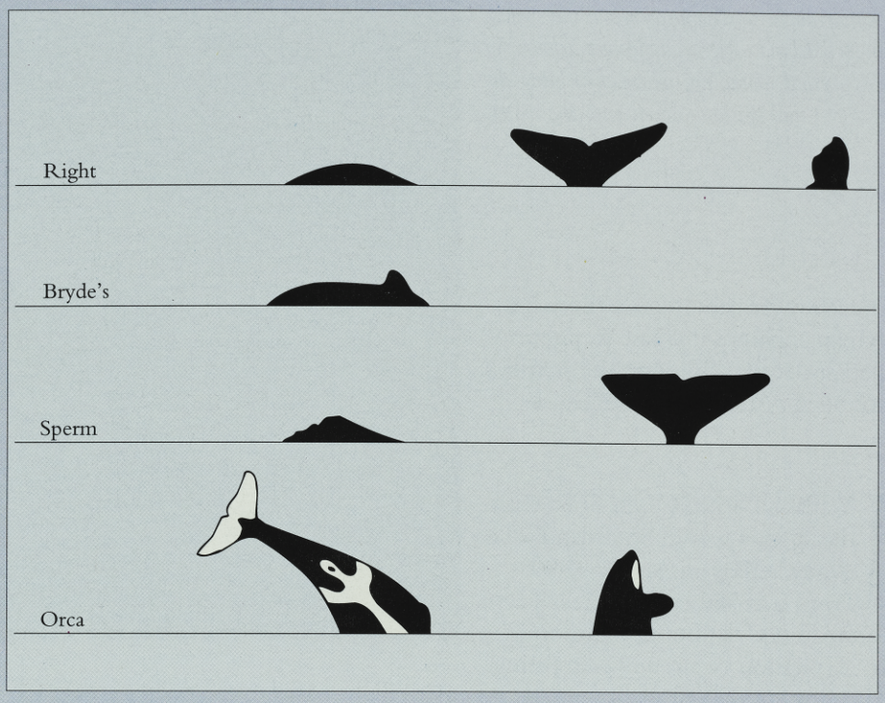
RIGHT WHALES are probably the easiest of the large whales to identify. They are the only ones without any dorsal fin and they have distinctive white callosities on their heads. They can also be distinguished by their blow – a distinctive V-shaped column of spray up to five metres tall, formed from the twin blow-holes

Even from fleeting glimpses of their tails, right whales can be recognised by the curved, smooth blades and deep tail notch. Like sperm whales and humpback whales the tail is raised clear of the water when diving. The stocky body of a stranded right whale should be easily recognisable. And from skeletal remains the spectacularly arched jaw bone should be a give-away.

They are slow swimmers, cruising at less than two knots, and can sprint to about five knots. They usually breathe two or three times a minute for several minutes before making a long dive lasting 10 to 20 minutes.

In breeding grounds they have been observed "sailing" – thought to be a form of play – where the tail or flippers are raised and the animal sails downwind.

They communicate through a series of low-frequency moans, belches and pulsed sounds, mostly at night, but their acoustic behaviour is nowhere near as complex as that of humpback whales.



The surfacing characteristics of four whales found in New Zealand waters.

TIM HIGHAM

An excited Mike Donoghue, DoC's marine mammal specialist, counting the large numbers of right whales over the Auckland Islands last August.

The Auckland and Campbell Islands whales are the only remaining major breeding population which is not being monitored, he says. Donoghue proposes shore and boat-based observation to build up a comprehensive photographic catalogue, and the collection of skin tissue for genetic analysis against other breeding populations.

There will also be interest this winter to see whether the pod of about ten right whales returns to Te Waewae Bay. If New Zealand whales breed about every three years, like the Patagonian population, then this is a possibility.

Genetic analysis and photographic cataloguing could provide clues as to the origin of this pod; whether they are vagrants from south-east Australia or overflow from the Auckland Islands population.

RIGHT WHALES are unique among whales in calving and mating so close to shore. Important conservation management issues will arise if right whales do start recolonising traditionally used areas of the New Zealand coastline. Some, such as Wellington Harbour, may no longer be suitable as calving grounds because of shipping and port developments.

Recent television pictures from South Australia showed the vulnerability of this species to entanglement in ropes and fishing gear. This coastal whale is also susceptible to habitat depletion, and their surface-feeding habits are unsuited to coping with pollution, particularly oil.

Little is known of the effects of small boat traffic on whales in breeding bays, and a buildup of accessible populations would inevitably create commercial and recreational whale watching pressures.

Nearly 60 years after right whales became the first whale species to be given full international protection, they are only just starting to show signs of an increase. There is much to be learnt and many management challenges to be met if the comeback is to be a lasting one. ❖

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