

Mammals

Creature Features

- Whales, dolphins and dugongs are mammals, which means they are warm-blooded, breathe air and suckle their young
- Around 30 species of whales and dolphins have been recorded in the Great Barrier Reef area
- All whales, dolphins and dugongs are protected species in Australian waters
- Dugongs are one of the world's few vegetarian marine mammals, they can live for at least 70 years, and grow up to three metres long. They have only one calf at a time who remains with their mother for around 18 months after birth and their closest land relative is the elephant
- Whales swim by moving their tail, called a fluke, up and down; the lung of an adult humpback is the size of a small car
- Migaloo (the name Australian Aboriginal community elders from the Hervey Bay area use to describe a White Fella) is the name of the only known white humpback whale in the world. Migaloo visits the Great Barrier Reef once a year when he migrates north from the Antarctic.



Dolphin

Dugong and Calf

Population Pressures

Whales, in particular humpbacks, were subject to commercial harvesting. Between 1952 and 1962, 7423 humpback whales were killed at Tangalooma whaling station on Moreton Island and a smaller sister station at Byron Bay in New South Wales. During this period of whaling the quota for Tangalooma was 600 whales per annum. The whaling station would work seven days a week once the season began, harpooning as many whales a day as they could process. The whalers thought the whales would just keep returning every year. By 1962 the industry had become unviable due to the small numbers of whales passing through

so they closed it down with an estimated whale population of only a few hundred whales. Today whales are protected with many populations starting to increase and it is estimated that more than 12 000 whales migrate to the waters of the Great Barrier Reef from the Antarctic each year.



Humpback Whales



Minke Whale

The Downside for Dugong

The only historical evidence of dugong population decline comes from descriptions such as 'endless herds of dugong' published in memoirs during the 1800s and early 20th century. Dugong herds are now believed to be only a fraction of their former population size. Experts consider the decline in dugong numbers is due to deaths from human-related causes such as habitat loss or degradation, fishing nets, shark nets to protect swimmers, unsustainable traditional hunting in some areas, boat strikes, and marine debris (pollution).

A dugong population in the Great Barrier Reef can only cope with human-caused mortality (deaths caused by humans) of less than one to two per cent each year. This means that if there are 200 dugongs in a bay, the population will decline if there is a loss of more than two to four dugongs per year from all human causes, for example fishing nets, boat strikes, and traditional hunting.

The largest and most important remaining concentrations of dugongs in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are in the Cardwell/Hinchinbrook, Cleveland to Upstart Bay, and Shoalwater Bay areas. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has established Dugong Protection Areas and is working with Traditional Owners to assist them with managing their hunting sustainably.



Go Slow for Those Below

- Be on the look out for dugong when you're in areas that they are known to inhabit or feed (for example, shallow seagrass beds)
- Slow down your vessel to a no-wake speed (less than 10 knots) in these areas
- If boating disengage your propeller whenever possible, if a dugong or whale appears near your boat
- Be alert and watch out for whales at all times, particularly during whale migration season (May to September)
- Remember pollution that goes down the drain can end up in the ocean.



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority
www.gbrmpa.gov.au