



Sydney Whale Season Background

Each year the Humpback whales migrate along the east coast of New South Wales. From May to early December they and other whale species are swimming past the Sydney coastline as they head north to mate and give birth and then back south to their summer feeding grounds in Antarctica.

It is estimated that in 2006, over 7000 humpbacks made the journey north, this number is growing each year as the population recovers from years of over hunting in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was estimated that at the beginning of the moratorium (1986, IWC) on hunting whales, that there were only 300 to 400 Humpbacks left on the east coast migration (group 5). While it is unknown exactly what the pre whaling population of the group 5 Humpbacks was, estimates range from 30,000 to 80,000.

There are a number of places along the coast that are well sited for whale watching from the shore in Sydney. One of the best places to see whales from shore is from Cape Solander in the Botany Bay national park. Since 1998, volunteers supported and organised by the NPWS, have carried out an annual survey of the migrating humpbacks from Cape Solander. Each day, from sunrise to sunset in all weather conditions, the volunteers count and log the number of whales passing by. The figures they gather illustrate the recovery of the Humpback population. In 1998 only 298 whales were spotted over a 35 day period, while in 2006, over 1608 whales were counted over 68 days. This is an increase of 440% over a 9 year period or an increase of 50% per annum, while the season itself has doubled in length.

This growth has led to a large increase in whale watching activity in the Sydney region in particular. The 2007 season sees approximately 8 companies offering vessel based whale watching with a capacity of over 85,000 passengers, up from only 2 companies with 2,500 capacity in 2001. There has also been a corresponding increase in shore based whale watching, particularly in the northern migration season around June and July when the humpbacks are following the currents in close to the coast. This of course is harder to quantify, as while there are reliable estimates of numbers visiting prime locations such as Cape Solander and North Head, it is possible to watch whales from almost any headland along the coast.

The least recognised part of the whale watching season is the southern or return migration. This occurs from early August to early December, during this time, the whales are following the south flowing Great East Australian Current (or the EAC). The strongest flow can be anywhere from 2 to 20 nautical miles off the coast, so it is harder to see the whales from shore, as in the northern migration, when they tend to stay closer than 2nm. For this period, vessel based whale watching is the rule. The exception to this rule are the mother whales with newborn calves. These pods often swim very close inshore during the later part of the southern migration.

For more information on the growth and economic value of whale watching in the Sydney region go to IFAW.org reports download page.

For information on whale watching in NSW and shore based whale watching please go to NSW National Parks