

Southern Right Whale Facts

The Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena australis*) is a baleen whale, one of three species classified as right whales belonging to the genus *Eubalaena*.

Considering that whales can be seen from as close as a few metres from the rocky cliffs, Hermanus deserves its title of best land based whale watching spot in the world.

The whales arrive from their feeding grounds in the Antarctic in June, taking anything up to eight weeks to swim the 3000km at a leisurely speed of about 4 – 5 km/ph.

The gestation period is about 12 months and the calf is born tail first. The newborn is helped to the surface of the ocean by its mother to take its first breath, and after thirty minutes has learned to swim. The calf and mother spend the first year together, with the baby living off its mother's milk.

Calving takes place in August and September and the males arrive for mating in October when the whale populations peak. When a calf is born, it is between 5 and 6 meters long. By adulthood (approximately 10 years) the males are on average 15.2 m and the females 16.5 m.

The lifespan of the Southern Right whale is estimated to be 90 - 100 years.

The Southern Right whales - so named because it was considered the 'right' whale to catch. The fact that it was rich in oil and baleen (the large food filter plates that hang from the roof of the mouth) and floated when killed, resulted in this slow moving behemoth becoming the most ruthlessly hunted of the whale species, taking the estimated population off the South African coast from 25 000 to only 50 by 1935. Since then they have received international protection and the annual population doubling every ten years.

From a distance, Southern Rights can be distinguished from other whales by their signatory five metre high V-shaped spray when they come to the surface. The head of the Southern Right is large and covered with wart-like bumps called callosities. These differ in size and position and are often used to identify individuals.

Whales, like dolphins communicate by means of sonar. They make clicking, grunting and whistling sounds which also act as a means of echolocation. These can be heard for miles under water, and can also be heard from above water.

Habitat

The Southern Right whale has a circumpolar distribution and inhabits sub antarctic water between about 30° and 55° south. The whales migrate south during the summer months when supplies of krill are more prolific, and north during winter and spring to mate, calve and rear their young. They appear around the South African coastline from May to December. They can be seen interacting in the sheltered bays and coves close inshore and near river mouths.

Diet

The Southern Right Whales are filter feeders and get their food through the water which is filtered through the baleen in their mouths. Plankton and other tiny crustaceans are constantly being ingested. On occasion they are also bottom feeders, eating benthic prey from the mud on the ocean floor.

Baleen: A series of stiff, flexible material that hang from the upper jaw. The inside of the baleen is edged with hairy plates that filter krill. Baleen is made of keratin (the same substance our fingernails are made of) and can be up to 3 meters in length. It is also called whalebone.

Swimming and other water activities

Unlike fish, whales swim by moving their tails up and down.

Breaching

When a whale leaps out of the water, sometimes twirling around, it is called breaching. This action may be done purely for play, or may be used to loosen skin parasites and other irritations the whale might have. Breaching is also believed to be a means of communication with other whales and is usually done in sets of between four and six. A whale may push three-quarters or more of its body out the water and fall back into the sea with an enormous splash.

Fluking

Fluking is when a whale raises its tail out of the water as it begins a dive.

Lobtailing

This is an activity in which the animal sticks its tail out of the water, swings it around and then slaps it onto the water's surface. This produces a loud sound which is believed to be a means of communication between whales.

Logging

This is when the whale is merely lying in the water, with its tail hanging down. Part of the head and back are exposed.

Spouting

When whales blow water out of the blowholes located near the top of the head it is known as spouting. Southern Right Whales have two blowholes which act as nostrils. When they blow water out of their blowholes a distinctive V-shaped cloud of vapour is produced largely by condensation when warm breath comes into contact with cooler air.

Spyhopping

An activity in which the whale pokes its head out of the water, possibly to take a look around.

Grunting

A loud, bellowing sound that carries up to 2km away, often heard at night.

Sailing

Whales sometimes lift their tails clear of the water for long periods.