

South Australian Encounters

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In recent years there has been a marked increase in cetacean sightings off the South Australian coast. This increase relates to an increase in whale numbers but also indicates heightened public awareness to whales, whale watching and reporting of sightings.

There are 25 species of cetaceans recorded in S.A. waters varying from the cryptic Straptooth and Beaked whales to the more obvious large baleen whales such as Humpbacks and Southern Right whales.

The most commonly encountered whale in the sheltered coastal bays and inlets is the Southern Right. Approximately 100 individuals visit South Australian waters of a possible world wide population of 3000. These whales are often seen during winter months in the Encounter Bay area South of Adelaide, Kangaroo Island, gulf waters and the West Coast where warmer water provides the attraction for pregnant females to give birth. The head of the Bight area on the states west coast is the area of greatest activity. On the 12th August 1993 56 Southern Right whales and 23 calves were counted. Observations of courting, mating, giving birth and other behavioural studies are currently being undertaken at the head of the Bight by Steve Burnell from the University of Sydney, Veterinary Anatomy Department, providing valuable information on this little known species.

Whale watching activities by the public are concentrated around the head of the Bight and Encounter Bay and opportunistically around the state. The sheer remoteness of the Bight area provides protection to the Southern Rights. The area is accessible through Yalata Aboriginal land and high cliffs above the bays and inlets provide protection to the Whales from human activity and interference.

The Encounter Bay area centred around the popular Victor Harbour holiday town provides for good whale watching through the winter months. the sheltered bays along this coast provide ideal waters for giving birth, these shallow sheltered and relatively warm waters were once south by large numbers of Whales prior to intensive whaling in the 19th century. In excess of 26,000 Southern Right whales were taken in Australian and New Zealand waters with Encounter Bay operations being a major centre of this industry.

Southern Right whales have returned to this area in low numbers, however the accessibility of the area and the whales habit of hugging the coast provides many rewarding experiences to south coast Whale watchers. Numbers of watchers vary depending on whale visits. The 1991 season attracted an estimated 70,000 - 100,000 whale watchers. Peak viewing is encountered when the animals occasionally remain in the bay for up to two weeks at a time.

The winter months whale watching generally involves very few whales. Perhaps 6 whales can provide the whale watching to large numbers of people. These few whales tend to remain within the area bounded by Encounter Bay, Gulf St. Vincent and Kangaroo Island during the whole whale season often returning to Encounter Bay on several occasions.

The benefit to the economy of the Encounter Bay area is obvious and this in itself provides a degree of protection for the whales. The major impacts of this shore based whale watching is on the coastal environment with damage caused to coastal dunes in the past has been excessive.

Within the local area a co-operative approach to the management of Whale watching has been taken. Consultation between the two shore based whale watching operators, local government, tourism departments, S.A. Police and Department of Environment and Natural Resources officers has resulted in a concerted effort to protect the whales, whale watchers and the coastal environment whilst enhancing whale watching experiences.

Strategies such as media bans on whale sightings in environmentally sensitive sand dune areas, a mobile Department of Environment and Natural Resources information service on site, and concerted education campaigns outlined by Dick Olesinski are achieving the desired aim. Amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Act have provided a more appropriate legislative approach to whale protection. Previously Section 68 of the National Parks and Wildlife Act referred only to injuring or molesting protected animals which did not address the issue uncontrolled access to whales by swimmers, boats or aircraft. To provide guidance to whale watchers guidelines were formulated based on existing Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service whale watching guidelines. These guidelines were modified to incorporate Encounter Bay management objectives. The Encounter Bay area was zoned to cover inshore and offshore waters. The inshore protection area required modifications of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service guidelines resulting in boats and swimmers being restricted to 300 metres from whales within the inshore zone whilst aircraft are restricted to the recognised 300m height above whales, with helicopters to avoid flying directly over whales.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The major emphasis to the management of whale watching along the South Australian coastline is through public education and awareness with information being directed state wide and within the Encounter Bay area.

To provide legislative backing to the protection of whales within south Australian waters Amendments to the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Act were required. Previously the only relevant section of the Act (apart from taking of protected fauna) was Section 68 which prohibits the injury or molesting of protected animals.

Recent Amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Act have provided additional protection for Whales by including powers to wardens to direct persons not to undertake or continue acts or activities that is or is likely to be detrimental to the welfare of protected animals.

The Amendments also allow for the development of specific whale watching regulations. These regulations being formulated at present will provide for the management of whale watching within South Australian waters. These regulations will follow closely existing guidelines with some modifications such as ability to provide permits for scientific research and whale watching activities.

The future management of whales within South Australia is somewhat reliant on the on-going research by the South Australian Museum and behavioural studies being undertaken at the head of the Bight. The museum undertakes monitoring of whales through photographic records of head callosities patterns. Much of this work is undertaken from the air with regular flights through South Eastern Australia. This research is undertaken with sponsorship forthcoming from B.H.P.

Whale watching in South Australia should continue to develop. The public interest in the Southern Right whale will continue to grow. The current public awareness campaign should be further developed to minimise impacts on the coastal environment and provide the protection against disturbance required for whale numbers to increase.

The issue of boat and aerial whale watching activities will be watched closely. Future regulations will address this issue within areas such as Encounter Bay and the head of the Bight. This activity is minimal at present and is to be managed closely to avoid disturbance to Whales and the Whale watching public.

The future looks positive for whale watching in South Australia and hopefully the coming years will provide more encounters as the Southern Right whale returns to south Australian waters.