Whales, dolphins and dugongs

Above: Breaching humpback whale

Around 30 species of whale and dolphin are found in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Dwarf minke whales, humpback whales and bottlenose dolphins are among the most commonly sighted and reported species. These mammals all belong to a group of marine animals known as cetaceans. Like all mammals, cetaceans are warm-blooded, breathe air and suckle their young.

Porpoises and dolphins are different species. Porpoises refer to a group of six species with characteristic spade-shaped teeth and the absence of a distinct beak. Dolphins may or may not have a beak, and usually have many small pointed teeth. All species of dolphin are protected in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Dugongs, or 'sea cows' are marine animals which can grow to about three metres in length and weigh as much as 400 kilograms. They are the only marine mammals in Australia that live mainly on plants. The name 'sea cow' refers to the fact that they graze on seagrass. Dugongs are more closely related to elephants than to other marine mammals such as whales and dolphins.

Humpback whales come from Antarctic waters to the Great Barrier Reef from May to September to calve and to build up strength over the winter before they return to the Antarctic in summer.

Large-scale whaling in the 1940s, '50s and early '60s were thought to have reduced the population of humpback whales in the Great Barrier Reef Region from around 25,000 animals to between 200 to 500 individuals.

Since the harvesting of whales ceased, the humpback whale population has increased to over 20,000.

Below: Humpback whale and calf; bottlenose dolphin

Learn more about safe practices when boating around whales and dolphins

Left and below: Bottlenose dolphin; dugong