

Sperm Whales: Deep Sea Divers

Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) are unique among whales because of their size and diving ability. They are not only the largest of all toothed whales but also the largest toothed creature to ever exist. They are also known for their ability to dive to great depths for an extended period of time.



Photo courtesy of Evasion Tropicale

Physical Description

Color: Sperm whales are dark gray to black in color and have wrinkled skin that is often compared to a prune.

Size: Sperm whales can grow to 11-16 meters (35-60 feet) in length and 14-50 tons in weight. Males typically weigh 2 to 3 times as much as females.

Head: These whales have the largest head and brain of any animal. Their heads are boxed-shaped and take up one-third of their body length. Sperm whales have a single blowhole (nostril) situated slightly to the left of center.

Fins: Sperm whales have small pectoral flippers located on their sides, and a small, rounded fin on the back.

Tail: Thick triangular tails, or flukes, which are dark-gray in color, often contain bite marks and scars that are used in identifying individuals.



S. Gero

Dorsal Fin



S. Gero

Fluke Print

Distribution

Sperm whales have a wide distribution and are found in deep waters in every ocean in the world. Females live primarily in tropical waters, while males travel widely and can be found at higher latitudes in polar waters. Large, mature males join females at the breeding grounds near the equator.

Sperm whales live in many locations throughout the Caribbean. A small group of about 200 whales resides in deep water west of the string of islands from Guadeloupe to the southern Grenadines. In the northeastern Caribbean, sperm whales have been spotted off of the banks of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin

Islands, the British Virgin Islands and the Dominican Republic. Photo-identification studies suggest that some individual sperm whales in the southeastern Caribbean (Dominica and Grenada) may be resident temporarily, and some individuals or groups travel between the island states of Guadeloupe and Dominica. It is not clear whether sperm whales are present in the northeastern Caribbean year-round or only during the fall and winter months.

Social Structure

Young whales grow up in family units made up of related female adult whales and other calves. Males leave their family groups between the ages of 4 and 21, and form loose, all-male groups. Sperm whales are considered the most social of all the great whales.

Feeding and Behavior

These behemoths spend a majority of their day hunting and feeding. They dive deeper than any other whale (from 400 to over 1000 meters) and can stay under water for up to an hour. Sperm whales feed primarily on giant squid and often carry scars from battles with the squid.

Female sperm whales and calves also gather near the surface for several hours a day to rest and interact with one another. They may lie quietly at the surface, seemingly resting, or actively socialize by close contact and rubbing, rolling and vocalizing. Occasionally, their behavior may be more active with lobtails (slapping the water with their tails) and breaches (jumping above the water surface).

Threats

It is estimated that about one million sperm whales were killed worldwide by whalers between 1740 and the 1960s when protections were put in place by the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Selective hunting of large males over many years has affected the male-to-female ration and the birth rate in some populations. Japan currently grants permits for the hunting of sperm whales in the North Pacific.

Interesting Facts

One of the most famous sperm whales is the fictional title character in Herman Melville's classic Moby Dick.

Sperm whales have a life span of over 70 years.



Photos courtesy of S. Gero

For more information, contact your local animal welfare organization or marine life protection and preservation society.