**Early Australian Whaling**

**Australia's whaling industry and whales -** <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/australias-whaling-industry-and-whales>



The Death Flurry,1865, by Oswald WB Brierly (1817–1894), watercolour 72.3 x 134.2cm. Brierly acted as manager of a pastoral and whaling business for a while, living at Twofold Bay. Courtesy National Library of Australia: an5576860.

Whaling was a central part of life in the first 70 years of the Australian colonies, from the 1790s to the 1850s. Whaling was the first primary industry of the colonies, as important as wool production.

The founding of the first colonies in New South Wales and Tasmania in the late 1700s coincided with a great expansion of deep-sea whaling into the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This unrestrained exploitation unfolded with extreme daring and no real sense of national boundaries. Hundreds of whaling ships from the United States, Britain and elsewhere worked around the coast of Australia.

Whaling became less important after the 1850s with the development of petroleum and the attraction of the gold rush. A big resurgence of whaling then occurred in the 1900s due to the advent of the harpoon gun and steam-powered factory ships.



Natives of Encounter Bay Making Cord for Fishing Nets, in a Hut Formed of the Ribs of a Whale, 1847, by James William Giles (1801–1870),  Courtesy National Library of Australia: an7350676

Whales are a sacred totem to many Aboriginal groups, and products from beached whales were highly valued by Indigenous Australians in pre-colonial times. Aboriginal Australians were sometimes involved in commercial whaling. At Twofold Bay in New South Wales they were very active in whaling and had an extraordinary influence on the way it was carried out.

Stocks of whales were massively reduced worldwide, more so in Antarctic waters than anywhere. Australia was one of the forerunners in the halt to commercial whaling in 1979. Since the ban, the numbers of some species that visit Australian waters, such as the humpback, are recovering well; however there is still grave concern for the survival of others. As humpback whales become abundant once again, whale watching is booming.

**Whales of Australian waters**



A humpback whale breaches – leaps out of the water. Courtesy Department of the Environment.

Today, humpback, fin, Bryde's, minke, and in limited numbers, blue and sei whales migrate through Australian waters annually. They swim from their rich Antarctic feeding grounds to warm northerly or tropical areas where they give birth to their young. Limited numbers of southern right whales migrate from their Antarctic waters but only up to about 30 degrees south (around the border of Queensland and New South Wales). These are all baleen whales, that is, they filter-feed on krill and other tiny animals.

Sperm whales are not baleen feeders. They eat giant squid and other larger animals. Sperm whales are widely dispersed in the world's oceans and prefer deep waters in locations where their food is abundant, such as off Albany, Western Australia and Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

Killer whales, or orcas, are actually the largest member of the dolphin family. They occur in all Australian waters but are not often seen.

**Indigenous connections with whales**

The whale is a sacred totem for many Aboriginal groups, such as the Darkinjung people of the central coast of New South Wales and the Woppaburra people of the Keppel Islands, Great Barrier Reef, Central Queensland. The Mirning people in South Australia have dreaming stories associated with whales. Traditionally the Mirning sang to the southern right whales and the whales responded.



Aborigines Cooking and Eating Beached Whales, Newcastle, New South Wales, c.1817, by Joseph Lycett (c.1775–1828), watercolour, 17.7 x 27.9 cm. Courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-an2962715-s11

No Indigenous Australians are known to have hunted whales before European settlement. But stranded whales were a valuable source of food and other products. Strandings made it possible for large groups of people to gather together. Watkin Tench records one of these gatherings at Manly, in Sydney. An Aboriginal rock engraving at Cowan in New South Wales also shows such a gathering.

Aborigines extracted whale oil from the blubber in special rock hollows with the help of fire. These rock hollows had great ceremonial significance. The oil was used to varnish spears and in the application of body decoration for corroborees. Whale bones were used to make utensils, weapons and for shelter.

For Indigenous peoples in Australia and in other continents, killer whales, or orcas, are regarded with awe. Killer whales often have the special role of 'soul keepers', harbouring the souls of departed people.

When whaling began in Australia, Aboriginal people played an active part. Aboriginal people of the south coast of New South Wales had a special role in shore-based whaling at Twofold Bay.

**World demand for whale products**



Consignment of whalebone for shipment to Sydney on the wharf at Eden, New South Wales,1900–1922, photographer CE Wellings. CE Wellings collection. Courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-vn3102888.

Until the development of petroleum in the mid 1800s, whale oil was highly sought after for lamps, candles, machinery lubrication, as a base for perfumes and soaps, and in cooking fats. Most whale oil was produced by boiling down (trying) the blubber of the whale. The finest oil of all, spermaceti, came from the head of the sperm whale.

Baleen plates are the part of a whale's mouth that sieves out their krill or other food from the ocean. Baleen is referred to as 'whalebone'. It was once the most widely used whale product. Baleen was used in corsets, umbrellas, whips, as hoops for skirts, and for may other purposes. Plastics have now replaced baleen.

The actual bones of whales were used as building materials and for making things such as kitchen utensils and knitting needles. The meat of the whale was also eaten.

Ambergris is the most valuable whale product pound for pound. A fatty substance from the digestive tract of a small percentage of sperm whales, Ambergris is used as a fixative for perfumes and in making cosmetics.

**Whalers and the early colony**



The whaler 'Britannia', one of the Third Fleet, departs from Sydney Cove, 1798, by Thomas Whitcombe (1763–1824), oil on canvas 82x122.5cm. Courtesy of National Library of Australia: pic-an2253068

At the time the British founded the colony of Sydney in 1788, deep-sea hunting of sperm whales had developed rapidly in the Atlantic and was about to expand into the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Previously the focus was on hunting right and bowhead whales in the North Atlantic. Spermaceti had been recently discovered: this was the finest and most valuable of all whale oils, from the head of the sperm whale. Sperm whales were more difficult to catch; they could put up quite a fight, but a lot of money could be made from them.

By the 1790s the new deep-sea whaling ships, many of them American, were present on the coasts of Australia and New Zealand. More than 800 ships chased the sperm whales and southern right whales around the south coast of Australia between 1800 and 1888. There may well have been more, as ships could easily have worked these lonely seas without being recorded. They pursued whales both in the cold southern waters and as they swam north each year into the bays of Australia for calving.

Whaling was part and parcel of the new colonies. The first governor of New South Wales, Arthur Philip, began his maritime career on a whaling ship and was keen to establish the industry in the penal settlement. The British government offered a large bounty for whale oil. The companies of Enderby and Champion made a deal with the British government to take convicts and supplies to Port Jackson and then go whaling. As a result, in 1791, five of the 11 ships in the Third Fleet to Port Jackson (now known as Sydney Harbour) were whalers with whaling captains. They were the Britannia, Mary Ann, William and Mary, Salamander, and Matilda.

These ships did some whaling off Port Jackson, where whales were abundant but the seas violent. Then they set out for calmer waters off Peru. All of them except the Matilda arrived back safely in London with cargoes of oil.

**Whaling around Australia in the 1800s**



Boats setting out after a whale from the ship Costa Rica Packet, which operated in Australian waters, c.1890. From Carpenter collection, courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-an24750423

The products of the early whaling industry were vital for the new colonies in Australia. The colonies relied heavily on whale products for survival and for export. Also, visiting deep-sea whalers paid or traded to be resupplied.

Sydney and New South Wales

By 1836, income from whale oil in the new colony was equal to that from wool. Thirty-nine local whaling ships were registered in Sydney, and they employed 835 men.

In the 1820s and 1830s Sydney smelled of whaling. Whalemen were urged to use wharves and coves on the north side of Sydney harbour for their activities, away from the residential areas on the south side. Alexander Berry's whaling station became known as Berry Bay. Archibald Mosman built a stone store, which is now a scout hall, at the head of Mosman Bay.

One of the first whaling stations outside Sydney was the Davidson Whaling Station at Twofold Bay near Eden, in southern New South Wales (1828). Numerous whaling stations were established around southern Australia in the late 1820s to 1830s.

Tasmania

A whaler transported the first European settlers to Tasmania. In 1803 Captain Bunker, of the whaling ship William and Mary from the Third Fleet, was chartered to take Lieutenant Governor Bowen to the Derwent River to establish a penal colony (now Hobart). On the way, Captain Bunker caught three sperm whales at Oyster Bay on the east coast. He commented that the 'whales were so thick he could "take" em without looking'. He boiled down their blubber before moving on to the Derwent River.

By 1836 Hobart Town had nine whaling stations which employed 400 men, and a station at Launceston employed another 50. £74,000 was raised from whale oil and bone in that year. Hobart started to build its own whale ships, which became famous in the South Seas.

South and Western Australia

Whalers were at Port Lincoln, South Australia, from before the colony was founded in 1836. On the west coast of Australia there was fierce competition from American whalers, who fished there as early as 1792.

Kim Scott's Miles Franklin Award winning novel That Deadman Dance explores the activities of American and local whalers and the experience of Aboriginal people who participated in the whaling industry, in a place modelled on Albany, Western Australia. Whaling had begun at Albany in 1835. American whaling ships preferred not to call in at Albany because they had to pay port and pilotage fees there. Instead they went 'around the corner' and anchored in Two People's Bay where a freshwater spring flowed and firewood was there for the taking, along with shellfish.

Later, in the 1840s, Tasmanian whalers set up stations in Victoria and South Australia (Fowlers Bay, St Peter's Island, and Streaky Bay) and then in Albany, Western Australia.

Deep-sea whaling rapidly stopped in the mid 1800s due to the development of petroleum.

**Deep-sea whaling, bay whaling, and shore-based whaling**



Manning the Capstan at the Tryworks to Haul in a Whale Carcass, Twofold Bay, c. 1900–1922, photographer CE Wellings, 12.0 x 16.4 cm. Courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-vn3102585

Deep-sea whaling was the method often used in the rush for sperm whales, because sperm whales were more often found out in the ocean rather than near the shores. It was possible though dangerous to capture whales in the open sea and boil their blubber for oil in 'try pots' on the deck of the ship. The oil was then stored in barrels below deck. Deep-sea whaling trips sometimes lasted for years.

Whalers often chose to go 'bay whaling' which meant they anchored the ship in a bay along the coast and sent the small whaleboats out for whales. The boats towed the carcases back to the ship for flensing (cutting off) and boiling the blubber.

Sometimes shore-based whaling was preferred: small whaleboats rowed out from the shore, as at Twofold Bay in New South Wales. A permanent station for extracting the oil was built on the shore. Sometimes the whales were caught with small boats then towed to the on-shore station by a larger ship.

**The hardest possible life**

The crews of whaling ships were sometimes tricked into service, or were looking for adventure like Herman Melville, author of Moby Dick. They formed a ragtag cosmopolitan mix of men from all places and cultures. Once on board they might be away for years. Conditions were tremendously hard and dangerous.

**Techniques of whaling – 1800s**



Part of the head and jaws of a sperm whale, on board the Costa Rica Packet, which operated in Australian waters, c.1890, albumen photograph 15.3 x 21.0 cm. From Carpenter collection, courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-an24750483.

Whaling ships were some of the toughest wooden ships every made. They were built more for endurance than speed and were up to about 300 tons in size. They carried about six or eight small quick boats that could be dropped onto the water and were ready to go the moment a whale was sighted. These boats had to get close enough for a man to harpoon the whale, preferably before being seen by the whale and at the same time avoiding the tail. The harpoon connected the whale to the boat by a rope or chain. Sometimes the whale towed the boat for many hours or even overnight before it could be killed with a lance. A whale could quite easily overturn or smash a whaleboat, especially during the death 'flurry'.

Back at the ship or whaling station, flensing knives were used to cut the blubber of the whale in strips. Then it was cut into 'horse pieces' and then smaller 'bible leaves', ready for boiling.

**Whaling words**

You can get a feeling for the whaler's life from the special terminology they used in the 1800s, such as:

* ***Chawed Boat***, a boat that has been chewed up by an attacking or angry sperm whale.
* ***Dandyfunk***, for this recipe the cook placed some ship's hardtack biscuits in a canvas bag and pulverized them with a belaying pin. The resulting floury mess was then mixed with slush left over from the boiling of salt beef and then baked for one hour…
* ***Flurry***, the final moments of a whale's life after it has been lanced…
* ***Funeral***, after the blubber has been stripped and the head removed the carcass was cut adrift for its funeral…
* ***Run***, the act of the whale when gallied or frightened. Whales don't swim, they run, sound [dive], settle, bolt, breach [leap out of the water] or round to [come to a complete stop]…
* ***Virginia Fenceline***, a term sometimes used in the logbooks to describe the ship's courses, which when cruising for whales meandered all over the ocean where the wind took them.

**Twofold Bay – unique teamwork with killer whales**



Whaleboat being towed by a harpooned whale (not visible) while the killer whale Tom swims alongside, close to a whale calf,  c.1900–1922, photographer CE Wellings, 12.1 x 16.4 cm. Courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-vn3103733.

At Twofold Bay, close to Eden on the south coast of New South Wales, shore-based whaling continued from the 1830s to the early 1900s – longer than anywhere else in Australia. The Davidson family whaling station practised a unique and amazing form of whaling here. Killer whales (orcas) were collaborators with the Davidson whalers, locating and herding whales for them to kill. This partnership is well documented through accounts and photos.

When the killer whales located great whales, they went to the shore at Twofold Bay lob-tailing (banging their tails on the water) to notify the whalers. The whalers then rowed out in their small boats. The killers herded the great whales towards the harpoon.

*When the whalers arrived, the killer whales would erupt into frenzied excitement, leaping out of the water and racing from boat to whale like enthusiastic dogs.  
Killers in Eden p.6*

Once harpooned, lanced and dead, the great whale sank and was left to the killer whales. The killer whales ate the tongue, the part they preferred. The next day the dead whale rose to the surface and the whalers collected it and towed it back to the station for processing.

The whalers knew each killer whale by the particular shape of its massive triangular fin and by its behaviours. The whalers knew them by name: Tom, Hooky, Humpy, Cooper, Typee, and 21 others. Most of the killer whales were named after deceased Aboriginal whalers.

Aboriginal people formed the majority of the whaling workforce throughout the existence of the station. It seems highly likely that the close relationship between the whalers and killer whales at Eden originated from pre-colonial Aboriginal connections with the killer whales.

**Harpoon guns and steamships – whaling starts again, late 1800s–1970s**



A whale is transported by rail to the processing plant, Byron Bay, New South Wales, 1961, photographer Jeff Carter (1928–2010). Courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-vn4546327.

From the late 1800s to the 1970s there was an enormous assault on the whales of the southern hemisphere. British, Dutch and Japanese floating factories were particularly active in Antarctic waters. Steam-powered whale catchers, exploding harpoons and deck-mounted harpoon launchers were introduced. This new whaling technology made it possible to take large numbers of humpback whales and then also the heavier and faster fin, sei, minke, and blue whales.

Australia was largely left out of the Antarctic whaling activity. However within Australia from the early 1950s whaling stations were active at Byron Bay in New South Wales, Albany in Western Australia, and Tangalooma on Moreton Island, Queensland. In 10 years of activity at Tangalooma, more than 6000 humpback whales were caught. At Byron Bay, over 1100 humpbacks were taken in eight years. The numbers of humpback whales on the east and west coasts plummeted to about 570 and 500 individuals respectively.

**Protests and cessation of whaling**

The International Whaling Commission was formed in 1946 to conserve whaling stocks. But it was not until there was a more generalised worldwide concern for conservation in the second half of the century that whaling could be halted and many species protected from extinction. The humpback was protected throughout its range worldwide by international agreement in 1963.

Greenpeace International – first action in Australia



Whale chaser harpoon gun, Albany, Western Australia, 1975. Photographer Robin Smith (1927–). Courtesy National Library of Australia: pic-vn4237688.

In August 1977, Greenpeace conducted a direct action pro-whale campaign in Albany, Western Australia. This was its first direct action campaign in Australia. The action involved Zodiac inflatable boats which went 30 km out to sea and stood between the harpoons and the whales. Around Australia the campaign gathered support and included Project Jonah, Friends of the Earth, and the Whale and Dolphin Coalition.

Frost Report

In 1978 the Australian Government set up an independent inquiry headed by Sir Sydney Frost. Its report led to the passing of the Whale Protection Act in 1980. However on the first day of the inquiry, the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company operating near Albany, Western Australia, announced that it would close down. The last whale, a sperm whale, was taken on 20 November 1978.

**Whale populations and trends**

One of the most endangered whales is the blue whale, the largest mammal of all. Numbers of the southern blue whale fell catastrophically from 239,000 in pre-whaling days, to only about 360 by 1973. In Antarctic waters an estimated 1700 now survive. Some of the factors that make recovery of blue whale numbers difficult are:

* sound pollution (e.g. ship noises) as sound is the most important sense for whales
* entanglement in marine rubbish and in fishing and fish farming equipment – particularly a problem for blue whales as they often feed at the surface
* collisions with ships
* built structures that impact upon habitat (e.g. marinas, wharves, fish farms, mining or drilling structures).

By contrast, numbers of humpback whales have recovered so strongly since 2000 that an estimated 3000 to 20,000 passed by Sydney in the winter of 2013. About 3000 whales are tracked in daylight by National Parks staff, but possibly 20,000 pass by unseen, many at night.

For further information on numbers and trends see the Department of the Environment.

**Useful links**

Organisations

* [Whale World - external site](http://www.discoverybay.com.au/historic-whaling-station) – Albany's historic whaling station which is now a museum
* [Eden Killer Whale Museum - external site](http://killerwhalemuseum.com.au/)

Other resources

* Department of the Environment, [Whale and dolphin watching locations and guidelines - external site](http://www.environment.gov.au/marine/marine-species/cetaceans/whale-and-dolphin-watching)
* Department of the Environment, [Whales, dolphins and porpoises - external site](http://www.environment.gov.au/marine/marine-species/cetaceans/species-found-australian-waters) – information on species found in Australian waters
* Staniforth, Mark, [Three whaling stations on the west coast of South Australia – Fowlers Bay, Sleaford Bay and Streaky Bay - external site](http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/archaeology/department/research/projects/awsanz/c97stan1.html)
* State Library of New South Wales, [Sealers and Whalers - external site](http://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/events/exhibitions/2010/mari_nawi/05_sealers_whalers/index.html) – from Mari Nawi Aboriginal Odysseys exhibition

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