



Humpbacks & High-Rises “Whale Tails” 2015

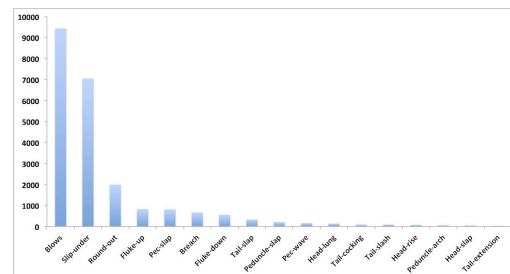
Season Summary

Every whale makes a difference. I'd like to think that every year we have taught this to a number of people – our volunteers and whale tourists. Whales make a wonderful example that we need to learn to see the beauty and wonder of this planet. Everyone who had the great opportunity to join for the survey trips knows what I am talking about.

The whale season started a little later than usual with at least two weeks later than last year. We also saw a reverse trend from last year with this year showing an offshore northern migration but inshore southern migration. This was likely a response to the strong El Nino starting in August/September. One to two week old calves were still sighted end of October pushing their limits of successful migration to the feeding grounds.

During 91 survey days between June and November, HHR volunteers covered 227 survey hours observing 382 individual whales of which 226 were adults and 156 juveniles or calves. And we saw a lot of breath taking moments. Just to give you an idea of the extend: We counted 9430 blows. When it comes to the most commonly observed surface behavior not associated with breathing, the pectoral slap and breaches dominated. In addition we counted a minimum of 156 dolphins on 43 occasions, 4 Hammerhead sharks, 2 other unidentified sharks and 11 turtles.

This year Facebook numbers have risen again: 1733 Likes, 150 blog posts reaching an average of 2000 people per week. Under the HHR Research Group 116 volunteers registered to support us during 2015. We have expanded to a fourth whale watch operator and with over 50 volunteers participating in boat based surveys our monitoring force is outstanding and strong. Our total number of fluke images now counts over 800 spanning 5 years. With the donation of images and our own photography we have around 70 000 images capturing whale activity on the Gold Coast for the past 5 years making it the largest and only marine mammal monitoring program in south-east Queensland. I urge you to support this program. We have no funding or government support and rely on you. We need people who care about what marine life we have left in south-east Queensland waters.



Observed behavior categories of 382 humpback whales surveyed in 2015.

A number of students were supported by HHR: Laura Torre and Josh Reinke are continuing their research as Master and PhD students, Katie Walters undertook a student project on



dolphins and Tora Waldren an IAP project on whale sightings and oceanography.

International headlines were made about Japanese whaling to commence in the Antarctic and 2 fatal strandings of calves on the Gold Coast.



Baby Boom on the Gold Coast. Every third whale in the Gold Coast bay was a juvenile.

Media

A number of stories about HHR research and protection for marine mammals were featured in local newspapers, TV and radio stations. This coverage is extremely important for us to be recognized as an organization that makes a difference for the Gold Coast community and beyond. Stories were featured in the Gold Coast Sun, Gold Coast Bulletin, Liquify Magazine, Redland Times, GC ABC Radio, Channel 9 and NBN News.

Events

We participated in a wide range of events including guest lectures at

schools, stands at community events, conferences and expeditions. Including National Science Week (16/08/15), Moreton Bay Marine Research Stations Open Day (21/11/15), GECKO public event (22/07/15), Green Week (07/06/15) and a school presentation at Assisi College (07/10/15), HHR board members Dr. Olaf and Josh presented their research findings at the Australian Marine Science Association conference in Geelong and Dr. Olaf was co-convenor for the Marine Megafauna Symposium at this event. The Whale Trails app was later presented at the International Modelling and Simulation conference in December on the Gold Coast.

Two HHR supported research expeditions were undertaken this year. A New Zealand expedition in January and February lead by Dr. Olaf and supported by a number of participants and the SY NONO management. The mission revealed declining numbers of dolphins in the Bay of Plenty. Numerous plankton samples were taken and analysed while sailing almost 1000 km along North Island shores. A second expedition was undertaken in August along the Great Barrier Reef to determine hot spots of humpback whale calving areas with hot spots determined south of Abbott Point and the southern Whitsundays.



A common dolphin swimming along side the sailing boat near the Bay of Plenty in New Zealand.



HHR New Zealand Expedition. Dr. Olaf Meynecke lowering a CTD to measure difference in temperature and salinity.

Our annual general meeting was held on 1st December with the HHR board being elected. The minutes will be available to members shortly.

Research projects

The new research project on respiratory infections of humpback whales will continue in 2016. Results from last year's first sampling suggested some success for the collection of hormones but improvement needed for the DNA collection method. The boom of drones in whale research was very much evident throughout 2015 and we are glad to see that we are at the forefront of a new era in cetacean research.

Research on habitat preferences of humpback whales revealed that whales spend significantly more time in cooler temperatures and areas with high temperature gradients. A survey of whale watch tourists on the Gold Coast showed that whale watchers care about environmental issues but are unlikely to take action. A research project on climate adaptation of the whale watch industry was finalized in May revealing the importance of flexible management

strategies to overcome income loss from increasing storm events and shifts in migration.



Humpback whale surveys at North Straddie supported by Rustic Pathways.

White Whale News

Finally Migaloo came to the Gold Coast. Last year he was sighted at Point Lookout on North Straddie on the 24th June and this year on the 10th August in the Gold Coast bay. The reasons why he was so late in the season may well be related to changes in ocean currents and temperature or his health conditions.



Migaloo swimming in the Gold Coast bay on the 10th August 2015.

You can read the story here:

<http://www.baysidebulletin.com.au/story/2372327/migaloo-visits-straddie/?cs=212>

A debate was sparked over the identity of Migaloo but all researchers working with humpback whales confirmed the sighting as Migaloo based on dorsal and



fluke identification with previous pictures from Migaloo. However, timing of sighting and size of Migaloo suggested significant differences to previous years. A white whale was washed up dead near Eden around the 11th December. This could be the last sighting of Migaloo but only a DNA sample can confirm.

Whale strandings and incidents

This year's strandings of humpback whales on the east coast of Australia were much lower than in the previous years. Two calves washed up in the Gold Coast bay in July (10th and 23rd). One calf on South Straddie that had to be released from its pain and put down and one calf that died at Palm Beach.

Other incidents include a lethal boat strike with a humpback whale near Gladstone, a Minke whale trapped in a reef lagoon, mass strandings of pilot whales and an orca at Bunbury in WA and a number of stranded whales were reported from Moreton and Fraser Island. The number of shark net entanglements was much lower than in 2014 with 2 reports of whales being entangled on the Gold Coast. Sadly, entanglements of whales and dolphins in the so called Queensland shark control program continue like they did for the past 50 years leaving a death trail of over 100 000 marine animals. But there is a sign of change and hope go to change.org and support the petition asking the government to collaborate and stop whale entanglement and with your help we will make it happen in 2016. This petition is already endorsed by businesses and organisations such as Gecko and Seashepard and will continue to grow. A sad sighting of an entanglement with a rope was made in the Gold Coast bay in August. A humpback whale was desperately trying

to free itself from a rope that started to cut through its fluke. We therefore urge you to support us in obtaining a research and rescue vessel that would allow us to help these animals.



A humpback whale entangled in rope trying to free itself. 3rd August offshore GC (courtesy Todd Burrows)

HHR service and students

HHR supporter brought the message of marine protection to the whale watching tourist. They inform them about the importance of research and marine protection. We also handed out flyers, gave presentations at schools, were giving talks and informing the community at events. Outstanding HHR surveyors for 2015 include Anna Fitzgerald and Zara King who demonstrated great dedication and commitment to our monitoring program. Three scientific publications will be available next year that directly derived from HHR research. Furthermore, Griffith IAP Student Tora Waldren helped investigating sightings with physical water properties from Hervey Bay, Katie Walters Griffith student project on Gold Coast dolphins provided a first insight into Gold Coast Broadwater dolphins and amazing re-sighting results and HHR Intern Lachlan Barter was working on survey data and social media.



Why everyone should be doing something: Our work isn't just about whales or dolphins. It is about creating a sense of responsibility and care for our environment. We need to start fixing things. So, we are going to continue in 2016 with:

- Whale snot sampling supported by Earthwatch
- Investigating strandings for the east coast of Australia through an Honours research project
- Combining efforts with many other organisations to replace shark nets with more marine friendly options
- Determine the impact of ocean warming on migration
- Rescuing marine wildlife

Every year we see injured marine wildlife and we are unable to assist. We aim to obtain a HHR Research & Rescue boat that is urgently needed to help rescue injured marine life, remove debris and support research in the Gold Coast bay. If you know anyone who is interested to stem this huge task, please, let us know.

HHR acknowledgement

HHR is a small community based organization, which heavily relies on the interest, support and good will of people who feel that protecting marine mammals and learning about them is important. In particular we like to thank the following organisations for direct contribution to our work:

Whale Watching Gold Coast, Whales in Paradise, Spirit of Gold Coast Whale Watching, Whale Watching Coolangatta, Seapix, Griffith Centre for Coastal Management, Manta Lodge,

Onset, Rustic Pathways. Many thanks to our many dedicated volunteers, students and researchers. We are proud to say that our work is honest, independent and for the well being of our marine wonders and a healthy marine future for the Gold Coast. Our ongoing work entirely depends on donation. Please, consider donating for whale research and protection at

<http://www.everydayhero.com.au/event/whaleresearch>

Wishing you all a wonderful Christmas and a great start into the New Year!

