

Humpback whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae*



Size/weight: 12–16 m, 25–30 tons

Lifespan: 40–100 years

Feeding: The humpback whale is a species of baleen whale. Their diet consists mostly of krill and small fish. Humpbacks have a diverse repertoire of feeding methods, including the “bubble net technique”.

Distribution/population size: The humpback whale is a cosmopolitan species found in oceans and seas around the world. Once hunted to the brink of extinction, populations have partially recovered after the whaling ban.

COP13 will specifically deal with the humpback whale population in the Arabian Sea, the ocean region between the Horn of Africa and India. This population is considered to be endangered and has been designated for “Concerted Action” since COP12 in 2017. Current abundance estimates are at less than 100 animals, with their stronghold off the coast of Oman.

The Arabian Sea population is geographically, demographically and genetically isolated from other populations in the Indian Ocean for about 70,000 years. Analysis of song indicates significant differences to other regions, too.

Body features: The humpback has a distinctive body shape, with long pectoral fins and a knobby head. The varying patterns on the tail flukes distinguish individual animals and can be used for photo-identification.

Biology: Humpback whales typically migrate up to 10,000 km each year, feeding in subarctic waters and breeding in tropical or subtropical waters. However, the Arabian Sea humpback whales are the only population present year-round in the same region. Seasonal upwelling of cold, nutrient-rich waters provides the food that permits whales to reside year-round in the subtropical Arabian Sea.

The humpback whale is popular for breaching and other distinctive surface behaviours. Males produce a complex song lasting 10 to 20 minutes, which they repeat for hours at a time. All the males in a group will produce the same song which is different each season.

Threats: The main threats to humpback whales in the Arabian Sea are bycatch, entanglement in fishing gear (including “ghost nets”) and ship strike. The region hosts many ports and some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

Underwater noise and risk of pollution from oil and gas activities as well as habitat degradation from coastal development, shipping and construction noise add to this.