

RETURN OF THE HUMPBACKS

A phenomenal increase in humpback whale numbers was witnessed by more than 25 000 people last spring.

Humpbacks were once almost hunted to extinction and the WA population only numbered between 500 and 600 when whaling ceased in 1963.

However, the State's humpback population is believed to be increasing at the rate of 10 per cent each year and could reach between 10 000 and 15 000 individuals within the next 10 years, according to John Bannister of the WA Museum.

He estimated that the population of humpback whales off the Western Australian coast could now exceed 4 000, which is larger than the population found along Australia's eastern coast.

These figures come from the Museum's regular aerial surveys and other research funded by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency.

"The spin-offs to tourism are enormous—25 licensed whale watching charters are now operating from Perth and Fremantle, compared with 20 last year," CALM wildlife officer Doug Coughran said.

To help ensure the whales were free to pass through the Perth area undisturbed, the Department of Conservation and Land Management recently published a new brochure on whale watching guidelines.

CALM also increased the frequency of patrols to ensure people were familiar with the guidelines.

Under a new strategy recently announced by the State Government, CALM now has an expanded role in marine management. A new marine branch will be established within CALM by the end of the year to oversee marine management and policy.

This means marine animals such as whales and marine conservation areas will benefit from strengthened State government management.

"The whales are moving south from breeding grounds in the warmer north-west waters, on their way to feeding areas in the Antarctic," Mr Coughran said.

"Each year, between

September and November, humpback whales reach the waters between Perth and Rottnest, creating a fantastic wildlife spectacle.

"If you are lucky enough to see humpbacks in a playful mood it is something that you will never forget."

CALM Marine Operations Manager, Peter Dans, said it was important for both private and commercial operators to abide by whale watching guidelines.

"The Department's new brochure describes humpback whale biology and behaviour and details the all-important regulations and guidelines that apply to whale watching," he said.

"This means keeping at least 100 metres away from whales. However, boats can then put their engines into neutral and allow the whales to approach of their own accord.

"Boats should only approach whales from a direction parallel with and to the rear of them and abandon contact with the whales at any sign of them becoming disturbed."

They should always avoid sudden or repeated changes in direction or speed and, when within 300 metres, move no faster than the slowest whale.

CALM requires commercial whale watching operators to be licensed and to record all whale interaction in a special log book. The completed log book information is collated by CALM and added to an established whale watching database.

Above left: CALM's Doug Coughran is one of the wildlife officers with the task of watching the whale watchers. Photo - Don Noble

Left: A great deal of spectacular behaviour, such as breaching and spy hops, was a feature of the 1994 humpback season. Photo - Doug Coughran



LANDSCOPE

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The golden whistler is a common forest bird. 'Forest Focus' (on page 10) discusses a five-year study into the effects of timber harvesting on forest birds, insects and mammals.



The 10th Light Horse Memorial Trail is one of two walktrails in Neerabup National Park. The story on page 22 takes you inside this little-known park in Perth's northern suburbs.



In the closing days of 1991, heavy downpours of rain flooded Rowles Lagoon in WA's Goldfields; and so began an unusual year of floods, frogs, flowers and fires (see page 42).



Aboriginal people of the northern deserts call the black-headed python 'warrurungkalpa', which roughly translates as 'grinder or crusher of rock wallabies'. See the story on page 17.



Radio collars are fitted to feral cats to help scientists track their movements. 'Hunting the Hunter', on page 36, focuses on research into the habits of these supreme desert hunters.

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The majestic and graceful whale shark visits the north-west of Western Australia each year and is fast becoming a major tourist attraction. What does the future hold for the world's largest fish? See page 28.



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