

BALEEN WHALES

including **MINKE WHALE**

(*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)

What is a BALEEN WHALE?

Unlike toothed whales, baleen whales do not have teeth. Instead they filter their food from the sea using a series of plates called baleen.

What is the MINKE WHALE?

The minke whale is the smallest of the baleen whales. It is found throughout the oceans of the world from the Arctic to the Antarctic. Minke whales are not thought to undertake a seasonal migration, but they do move further away from the shore in the autumn, possibly to breed. They are usually seen either singly or in pairs. Minke whales eat a varied diet, including a range of fish and squid as well as krill and other plankton. Young are born in mid-winter, after a ten month gestation period. Calves stay with their mothers for about two years and become sexually mature at the age of seven years. Minke whales can live to be up to fifty years old.

Why are minke whales of CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?

Because of its small size, the whaling industry ignored minke whales until the larger whales became scarce and gained protected status. Since the 1920s, whaling for minke whales has been conducted along the coast of Norway. After the second world war, this expanded to Spitsbergen, Shetland and the Faroe Islands and more recently to the Barents Sea and Iceland.

In the 1940s the IWC was established to manage whale stocks, but numbers continued to decline. In 1985 and 1986, a world-wide moratorium on whaling was established; this banned all whaling. Norway, however, "took out a reservation" which meant they could continue under IWC rules to legally hunt minke whales in the North Atlantic. In 1993 and 1994, they killed several hundred. While minke whales are protected in UK territorial waters, there is little that can be done under international law to control hunting. The only controls available internationally are those governing exports under CITES. It is not currently known at what population size a whale population can be sustainably harvested.



STATUS: All baleen whales including minke whales are protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. They are listed on Annex A of EU Council Regulation 338/97; consequently they are treated by the EU as though they are listed on Appendix I of CITES which prohibits their commercial trade.

The only exception is the minke whale population of west Greenland which is on Appendix II. Minke whales are listed on Appendix II of the Berne Convention and Appendix IV of the EC Habitats Directive.

Whaling is illegal in British territorial waters, under the Fisheries Act 1981 and the authority of the International Whaling Commission is upheld.

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MINKE WHALES IN THE DURHAM AREA

Around the British Isles the minke is the whale most likely to be seen off Scotland, the Northern Isles and Western Ireland. It is rare in the southern North Sea and in the English Channel. Minke whales are recorded in small numbers off the north-east coast and offshore, mainly between June and September. They occur on a fairly regular basis as far south as the Yorkshire coast. It was estimated in 1994, that there were 8,500 minke whales in the North Sea and its adjacent waters. It is classed as "fairly common" off the coast in the Durham area. Period strandings are recorded as well as offshore sightings. There are records of strandings of minke whale at Marsden (1919), Blackhall (1970s), Whitburn (1965) and Blackhall Rocks (1975, 1993).

Minke whales are at RISK from:

HUNTING - and the associated problems of controlling hunting at sea. Norway set quotas for the North Atlantic of 425 (in 1996), 580 (1997) and 671 (1998) minke whales. In 1998, 178 of the quota was allocated to the northern North Sea. Although this is outside British waters, it must be remembered that British waters only extend to 12 nautical miles offshore.

HABITAT DEGRADATION - due to coastal activities and climate change. Climate change could affect oceanic currents and therefore the availability of prey species.

OVER-FISHING - there is concern that the intensive level of fishing in UK waters may affect the abundance and availability of prey species. Cetaceans, such as minke whales, are dependent on fish, but it is difficult to obtain experimental evidence.

POLLUTION - the accumulation of toxic metals and chemicals, which are present in the sea, in the bodies of whales can lead to dangerously high levels of pollutants building up.

COLLISION WITH SHIPS - although this is not thought to be a major problem, there at least two records of minke whales being killed as a result of collisions with ships in UK waters.

Minke whales BENEFIT from:

FURTHER RESEARCH - comparatively little is known about the minke whales' life history, population levels and maximum sustainable yields.

AN END TO COMMERCIAL WHALING.

SUSTAINABLE REGULATION of European fisheries.

REDUCTION IN MARINE POLLUTION.

MEASURES TO SLOW DOWN THE RATE OF CLIMATE CHANGE.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS:

- Lobby for an end to commercial whaling and for reform of the Common Fisheries Policy in 2002.
- Report any sightings or strandings to Marine Conservation Society, the Environment Agency and the Local Records Centre.
- Take practical action to help to reduce the impact of global warming - e.g. use energy wisely, particularly fossil fuels. Make use of public transport and support renewable energy projects.