

First confirmed sighting of the Killer Whale *Orcinus orca* in Northern Territory coastal waters

Carol Palmer and Ray Chatto

Marine Ecosystems Unit,
Flora and Fauna Division, Department of Land Resource Management,
PO Box 496, Palmerston, NT 0831, Australia.
Email: carolL.palmer@nt.gov.au

Abstract

The first confirmed sighting of the Killer Whale *Orcinus orca* in Northern Territory coastal waters is reported here. It highlights the importance of members of the public taking the time to submit photos and information to the Marine WildWatch Hotline.

A school of 3-5 Killer Whales *Orcinus orca* in coastal waters off north-eastern Arnhem Land was recorded by three recreational fishers on the 31 March 2012. The fishermen took a number of photos of these impressive marine mammals as the animals hunted in the shallow waters off the Bromby Islands (Figures 1–2). From these photos we were able to confirm the first official sighting of the species in Northern Territory waters. Previously, there have only been unconfirmed sightings of Killer Whales in the NT, including those by aboriginal elders from the Yirrkala area, a possible sighting of a pod of 5-6 animals close to the bauxite plant at Gove in the early 1990s (R. Chatto unpubl.), and an unconfirmed report off Yirrkala in 1999 (Chatto & Warneke 2000).

Killer Whales are the world's largest dolphin species, the top marine predator globally and perhaps the most widespread vertebrate on earth, occurring in all the world's oceans (Pitman 2011). Although currently considered to be a single species worldwide, recent research in Antarctic waters has revealed that there are at least four distinct forms of Killer Whales (referred to as types A, B, C and D) based on saddle and eye patch shapes and colouration (Pitman 2011).

Overall, there is little information on the species in the tropics and sightings are rare. In Hawaiian waters, there have been two sightings of Killer Whales in 12 years and these sightings indicated that the saddle patches of tropical Killer Whales tend to be much darker and narrower than in more temperate populations (R.W. Baird pers. comm.). Interestingly, one of the Killer Whales photographed in Northern Territory waters had a relatively dark saddle patch similar to the Killer Whales recorded in Hawaiian waters (Baird *et al.* 2006).



Figures 1–2. Killer Whale off the Bromby Islands, north-eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, 31 March 2012. (David Francis)

A number of research organisations that monitor Killer Whales – the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Southwest Fisheries Science Centre and the Cascadia Research Collective based in Hawaii – have been notified of this rare sighting, which will add to a better global understanding of the species.

Under Commonwealth Legislation, the Killer Whale is listed as a Cetacean and Migratory under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act 1999). Internationally, the species is listed under Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS 1985) and under Appendix I on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES 2012). Under the IUCN (2012), the species is classified as Lower Risk.

The sighting of Killer Whales in Northern Territory waters is an important record and highlights a rare occurrence. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of the public reporting marine mammal sightings and taking photos when possible.

Please report all marine mammal sightings to: Marine Wildwatch Hotline on 1800 453 941.

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