

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

The Sperm Whale



Photo: © Brian J. Skerry, National Geographic

MOBY-DICK STILL IN DANGER

The wide-ranging Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), which occurs in all the world's oceans, is listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and ranked vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. An accurate worldwide population count is lacking – there may be as few as 200,000 Sperm Whales globally. In U.S. waters, populations are generally small. For example, off the Pacific Coast, there are about 1,200 Sperm Whales and in the Gulf of Mexico, 1,300 individuals.

PROTECTION FROM WHALERS

The principal threat to this species has historically been whaling. Whalers have killed approximately one million individual Sperm Whales. Current threats include whaling by nations such as Japan, illegal whaling, ship strikes, entanglements in fishing gear, toxic ocean contaminants, and anthropogenic noise.

KNOW YOUR WHALE

- Self-defense: Herman Melville's classic tale about a Sperm Whale, *Moby-Dick*, was based on fact. The whaling ship "Essex" was sunk by an enraged male Sperm Whale in 1820 in the South Pacific, becoming one of the most well-known (and effective!) acts of aggression by an animal against his human pursuers.
- Supersized: adult female Sperm Whales can reach 36 feet in length and weigh up to 15 tons; males can reach 52 feet long and weigh up to 45 tons. The Sperm Whale's head makes up 25-35 percent of its total length. Its brain is the largest on earth, averaging 17 pounds.
- Deep-Dive for Calamari: Sperm Whales can dive over 3,000 feet. Their principal prey is giant squid, but they will also feed on octopus, fish, and other marine animals.
- Its Namesake: this species contains a spermaceti organ in its head. The exact function of spermaceti for whales is not known.
- Slow to Mature: females become sexually mature at nine years of age and physically mature at 30 years; males often do not mate until their late twenties and are physically mature at 50 years. Females produce a calf once every five years and form lasting social bonds with other females in their family.

CLIMATE CHAOS

Rising sea surface temperatures can adversely affect Sperm Whale food supplies and negatively affect calf production.

