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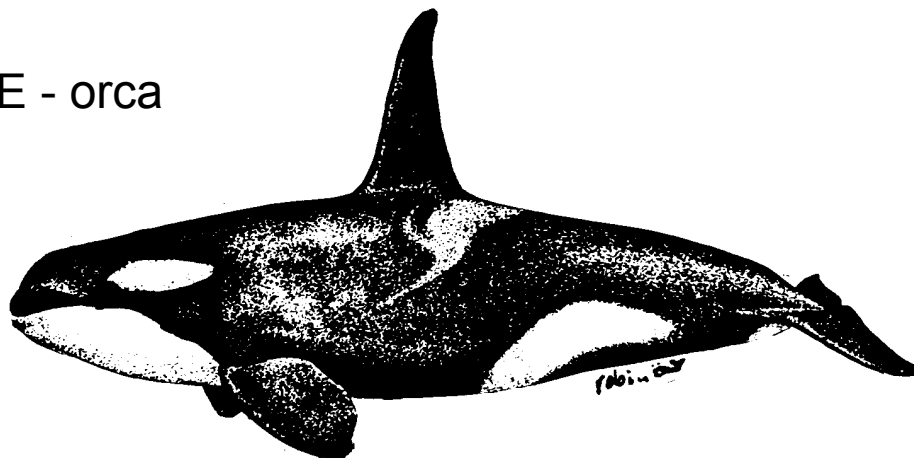


AMERICAN CETACEAN SOCIETY

KILLER WHALE - orca

(*Orcinus orca*)

Class: **Mammalia**
Order: **Cetacea**
Suborder: **Odontoceti**
Family: **Delphinidae**
Genus: ***Orcinus***
Species: ***O. orca***



The orca or killer whale, with its striking black and white coloring, is one of the best known of all the cetaceans. It has been extensively studied in the wild and is the star of the show at many sea parks and aquariums. An odontocete, or toothed whale, the orca is the only carnivorous whale. Its name is misleading, however; while it is a fierce hunter with well-organized hunting techniques, no case of its attacking a human has ever been documented. The killer whale has a highly evolved and complex social structure, and is found in all the oceans of the world.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION The killer whale, or orca, is a long, thick, streamlined animal. It has a blunt round head that is tapered, with an indistinct beak and straight mouthline.

COLOR The killer whale has a striking color pattern made up of well-defined areas of shiny black and cream or white. The dorsal (top) part of its body is black, with a pale gray "saddle" behind the dorsal fin. It has an oval, white eyepatch behind and above each eye. The chin, throat, and undersides of the flukes are white. It can be individually identified by its markings.

FINS AND FLUKES The most distinctive feature of the killer whale is its dorsal fin, which can reach 6 feet (1.8 m) high in males and is shaped like an isosceles triangle. The immature male and the female dorsal fins are also large, reaching 3 feet (91 cm) high, but are falcate (curved). Its paddle-shaped flippers are broad and rounded, and can reach a length of nearly 6 feet (1.8 m) and a width of 3 feet (.9 m).

LENGTH AND WEIGHT The male killer whale can grow as large as 32 feet (9.6 m) long, and weigh 8 or 9 tons. The female can reach 23 feet (8.2 m) in length, and weigh 4 tons.

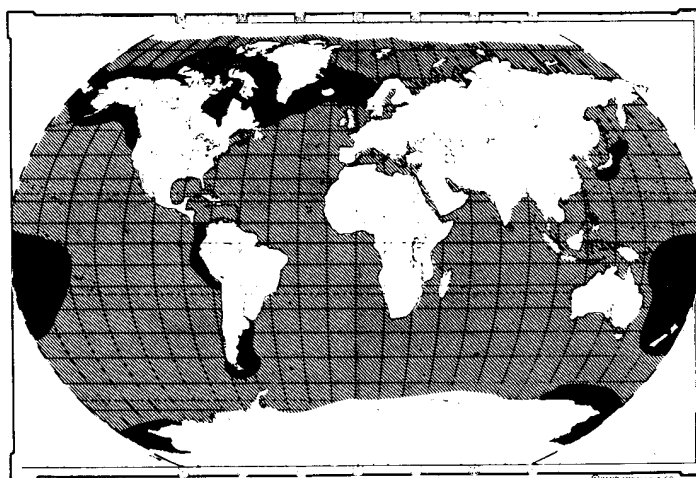
FEEDING The killer whale's diet consists of sea lions, elephant seals, porpoises, squid, sharks, fish, penguins, and smaller whales such as belugas and narwhals. It is known to attack very large whales, but probably the successful attacks are limited to sick or wounded whales. It hunts in packs, and will cooperate in attacking its prey in much the same way that wolves do.

The mouth of the killer whale is large and well adapted for hunting. It has 46 to 50 conical-shaped teeth that point backwards and inwards. The teeth interlock, which aids in gripping large prey, and also in tearing larger animals into smaller pieces for easier swallowing.

MATING AND BREEDING Not much is known about the killer whale's breeding habits, but it appears that mating takes place throughout the year, with no particular breeding season. It becomes sexually mature between 4 to 6 years of age, or when the male reaches about 20 feet (5.1 m) in length, and the female about 16 feet (4.1 m). Most females bear a calf every two years, and the gestation period is 13 to 17 months. At birth a killer whale calf is about 6-7 feet long (2.1-2.4 m) weighs 400 pounds.

DISTRIBUTION AND MIGRATION The killer whale is found in all the oceans of the world, though it seems to prefer cooler waters. Unlike some other species of whales, which follow a regular migration route each year, the killer whale seems to travel according to the availability of food. It is the only whale that moves freely from hemisphere to hemisphere. Other species of whales stay in either the Northern or Southern Hemisphere.

Orca whale
distribution

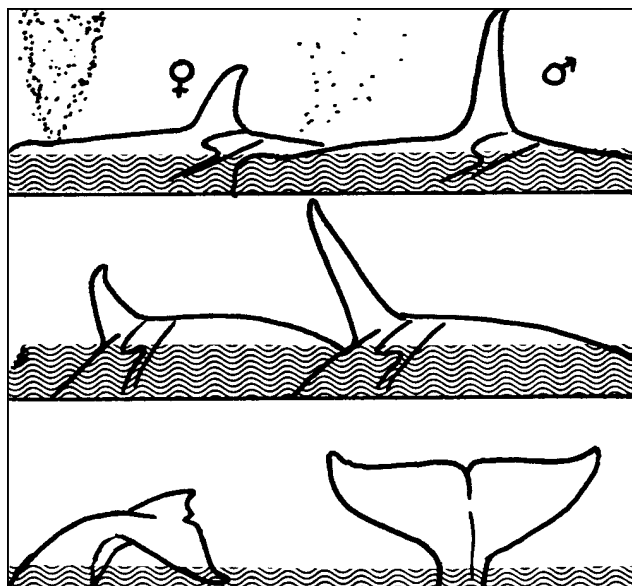


NATURAL HISTORY Killer whales live in pods, or groups, consisting of one or more males, several females, juveniles, and calves. Scientists have observed that they remain together, as a family group, for years. Mothers are very protective of their calves, and killer whales are known to protect and care for sick and injured companions. A killer whale calf may retain its close relationship with its mother for up to two years, or until she gives birth to a new calf.

In the Puget Sound area of Washington, some pods of killer whales, called "resident pods," live year round. Scientists have been studying these resident pods since 1976, using photographs to identify individuals from the differences in color pattern and dorsal fins. Known killer whales have all been numbered, and careful records are kept of their resightings. Some scientists have made recordings of the sounds made by the killer whales, and have learned that each pod has its own "dialect." The pod has some sounds in common with other pods, and other sounds that are unique to its own pod. Through these scientific studies, much has been learned about the killer whale's physical appearance, travel patterns, reproduction, behavior, and social habits.

STATUS Killer whales are fairly abundant, although the world population is unknown. They have no natural enemies, and have not been hunted as much as other whales--probably because they yield only about five barrels of oil per whale. At the 1980 meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), a zero quota was set on killer whales in the Southern Hemisphere. Population worldwide may be 20,000 plus.

Hundreds of killer whales have been killed in the coastal waters of Iceland, Greenland, and Norway by fishermen who claim the whales eat too much of the dwindling fish stocks. Recent questions (such as the effect on pod structure, the moral ethics of keeping captive animals, and capture techniques) have arisen over the capture of live killer whales for display in sea parks and aquaria. Many captive killer whales have come from Iceland; many others were captured in Puget Sound and the waters of British Columbia.



Orca Whale
Blow and Fluke
Diagram

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