

Whales of the Whitsundays

2024 Annual Summary

Photo credit: Lucy Seddon-Brown

A note from our President

The second year of the Whales of the Whitsundays (WoW) program was kicked off with our regions achievement of Whale Heritage Site designation from the World Cetacean Alliance (WCA). Being recognised as a Whale Heritage Site means that the Whitsundays is meeting globally recognised standards of conservation and management of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises).



Whale Heritage Areas must meet set criteria which recognise their commitment to cetacean conservation through responsible wildlife interaction and sustainability, these include:

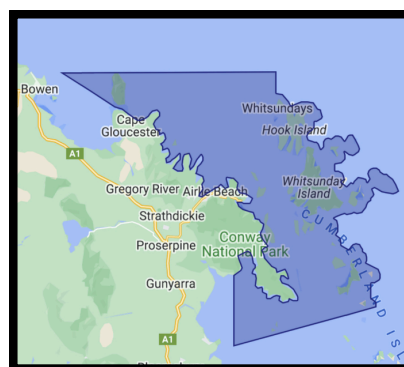
1. Encouraging Respectful Human-Cetacean Coexistence
2. Celebrating Cetaceans
3. Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability
4. Research, Education and Awareness

For more information, including our full application for designation see our page on the WCA website - [Whitsunday Whale Heritage Area](#).

Because Whitsundays is an important calving ground for humpback whales, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) established the Whitsunday [Whale Protection Area](#) in 2009 to provide humpback whales with more protection. Within the area vessels must stay at least 300 meters away from a whale. Whale watching and swimming-with-whales activities as part of a tourism program is prohibited.

The Whitsundays Whale Heritage Area aligns with the Whitsunday Whale Protection Area (right).

Whitsunday Whale Protection Area



2024 was a bumper whale season with record numbers sighted and some magical encounters shared by the community and visitors. This report provides a summary of the Whales of the Whitsundays program's activities and achievements and citizen science.

I would like to acknowledge that the WoW program is only possible due to the generous financial and in-kind support of our Corporate Sponsors, steering committee and project partners. A Whaley big thank you to everyone that makes our work possible!

We are looking to formally incorporate the WoW program under a more expansive banner - Whitsunday Marine Conservation. This will allow us to grow, and conserve and promote more of the Whitsundays amazing marine life. I'm excited to see what we can achieve in 2025!

Olivia Brodhurst, WoW President

WoW Corporate Sponsorship Program

The WoW program would not be able to operate without the generously support of a suite of Corporate Sponsors. Our Corporate Sponsors not only provide financial support, they are our biggest advocates. They regularly attend events, share our messaging and provide in-kind assistance such as Iconic Whitsunday Adventures whom provided a vessel, Viper, for our hydrophone training day, and others whom provide graphic design, merchandising and some whom are also members of our steering committee. Another big thank you to all of our 2024 Corporate Sponsors!



Our platinum sponsors Kiana Sail and Dive and Coral Sea Marina Resort were the recipients of this years Indigenous artwork. Created by local Aboriginal artist Casey McEvoy. Fingerprints were added into the artwork by our community to depict the ocean surrounding the whales at the Welcome Whales Event and Great Barrier Reef Festival.



Figures above: Roxanne Bowden from Coral Sea Marina Resort receiving their whale artwork (left), Nicole Rosser from Zig Zag (right) and crew from Kiana Sail and Dive (middle) receiving their Corporate Sponsor certificates.

Steering Committee

The WoW program is driven by a dedicated, passionate and knowledgeable Steering Committee. The committee held ten formal meetings in 2024 (Feb - Nov inclusive) and other sub-committee meetings as required. The Committee has representatives from the Whitsunday Conservation Council, Traditional Owners, local NRM, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Services, tourism industry and the general community.

Special thanks to steering committee member Deanna Vierling for being a fantastic Secretary over 2024 and to the rest of the steering committee for guidance, volunteering expertise and time.

We would like to thank donors for in-kind support received throughout the year from:

- Genevieve Williams from the University of Queensland whom came into the region to provide an update on the UQ whale song long term monitoring program and train us on the use of hydrophones
- The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority for running the pre-whale season event and providing world class management of the Whitsunday Whale Protection Area.
- The Whitsunday Sailing Club for providing space for multiple events / presentations and displaying the WoW pull up banner throughout Airle Beach Race Week
- Tourism Whitsundays for allowing us to use your boardroom for meetings
- Cr Clay Bauman for video creation for Welcome Whale Event
- The Great Barrier Reef Festival team and Whitsunday Creative Connections facilitating or supporting events
- Anyone else we have missed - a big thank you! You have all made a difference.

We finished the year with a celebratory social event in November to thank all of our sponsors and steering committee members. Steering committee membership is open to anyone in the community who is interested. To find out more email whitsundaymc@gmail.com.



Merchandise

NautiLass Apparel further expanded the range of fantastic Whales of the Whitsundays merch to include t-shirts, stubby coolers, earrings and cards.

Merch was sold at events throughout the year, made available for online purchase through the NautiLass website and sold at the Above and Below Gallery.

The community loved the shirts and were quick to support the initiative.

Some shirts were donated to committee members, Traditional Owners, etc. All money raised was donated to Whales of the Whitsundays program.

Keep an eye on our website to order online!



Explore our Achievements

In its two years, WoW has brought new events and educational opportunities, improved information sharing, and increased stewardship of whales to the Whitsundays. In 2024, the program was grown and events were expanded in an endeavour to reach even more people. WoW provided presentations, had a stand or ran activities at least nine community events and/or presentations in 2024. These include: Tourism Whitsundays March Networking Night, GBRMPA's Whale Season Information Night, the 2nd Annual Cultural Welcome Whale Event, the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) Festival's Nature Celebration and Family Fun Day, an extended two-day Hydrophone Training course, Virtual Learning Sessions, Whitsunday Conservation Council's Green Drinks, Probus and more.

Designated Whale Heritage Area



One of WoW's largest achievements to date was gaining official designation as a Whale Heritage Area through the World Cetacean Alliance and World Animal Protection on 25 March 2024.

'Whale Heritage Areas are a global network of outstanding places where local communities celebrate, respect, and protect cetaceans and their habitats.'

The Whitsundays is the second Whale Heritage Area in Australia and the first in a World Heritage Area. The designation puts the Whitsundays on the map globally as an important area for cetaceans.

Tourism Whitsundays Networking Night

At the March Tourism Whitsundays Networking Night, held at Northerlies Beach Bar and Grill, WoW gave an introduction of the program and presented the first round of corporate sponsors with framed certificates of appreciation. There was a lot of interest in the program by local businesses and a few came on board as new corporate sponsors!



Cultural Welcome Whale Event



In 2024, the second annual Cultural Welcome Whale Event kicked off NAIDOC week on the 5th of July. Originally planned to be held at the Airlie Beach Foreshore, rain caused a last minute relocation to the Proserpine Entertainment Centre. The event was led by Traditional Owners and saw the community united and inspired by traditional dance and song. A special thanks to Carinity Education Shalom, who brought kids from Townsville to join in the song and dance.

This year, there was also ochre painting and damper tasting, a community art workshop, and a screening of 'Whale Nation'. Casey McAvoy, a local Ngaro woman, painted two beautiful whale pieces that the community was invited to put their fingerprints on. These artworks went to two of WoW's biggest sponsors, Kiana Sail and Dive and Coral Sea Marina Resort.

The event was made possible by local Traditional Owners, Whitsunday Regional Council, and the Whales of the Whitsundays corporate sponsors.

Whale Season Information Night

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority together with WoW held an information night geared towards skippers and crew of local tourism operators. The info night was held at Whitsunday Sailing Club and had over 80 attendees. Everyone was encouraged to take extra care during whale season and to log their sightings to the new and improved Eye on the Reef app.

Crystal Lacey, a WoW Steering Committee founding member and project manager at GBRMPA, gave a presentation on her work digging through sightings from the last 40 years and separating adult and calf sightings.

Information was also provided on the regulations around safe vessel operation and whale watching in the Whale Protection Zone.



Great Barrier Reef Festival

WoW made a splash at both the Nature Celebration and Family Fun Day, bringing the wonders of the whale to life! WoW captivated young minds with an interactive activity that introduced kids, and their parents, to the mesmerizing world of humpback whale songs and how hydrophones capture these incredible sounds.

An estimated 300 kids visited our stall, each leaving their mark—literally—by adding their fingerprints to a collaborative artwork. But the real fun began when they were encouraged to channel their inner whale, belting out their best whale calls!

By engaging with kids, our future leaders, we're fostering a deep connection to marine life. Events like these not only educate, but inspire a lifelong love for the reef, ensuring its protection for generations to come.

If you would like to volunteer at any of our future events reach out to us at contact details below.



Print Media and Communications

WoW was featured in multiple newspaper articles and WoW President Olivia Brodhurst spoke about the project on 7News twice! ABC Radio supported the program airing two segments on the WoW.

The [Whales of the Whitsunday Facebook](#) page has continued to grow with almost double the number of followers compared to last year - sitting at 3,133 followers. There were also around 75,000 views of the Facebook page in 2024!

A [Whales of the Whitsundays website](#) was also launched this year that includes information on all the cetacean species that have been recorded in the region, information on approach distance guidelines, how to report an incident, all of the WoW Virtual Learning Sessions to date, and more. The website had 260 unique visitors in 2024.

There are five other websites featuring WoW information; [World Cetacean Alliance](#), [Tourism Whitsundays](#) and [Wildlife Heritage Areas](#).

Citizen Science

Citizen science is the collection and/or analysis of data relating to the natural world by members of the general public, typically as part of a collaborative project with professional scientists. The advantage of using citizen science as a tool has been well documented and includes:

- Allowing environmental observations to be done at very large geographic and computational scales
- Obtaining larger data sets to inform modelling
- Increased level of scientific literacy within the community, and
- Encouraging individuals to consider STEM pathways and careers.

WoW has a large focus on citizen science and runs campaigns to get locals and visitors more aware of the importance of citizen science and more involved in reporting their interactions to ongoing monitoring programs including the Eye on the Reef, HappyWhale, and UQ's Humpback Whale Song Long-Term Monitoring Program.

Citizen Science Data Disclaimer: The data provided herein are sourced from citizen science initiatives and may contain inaccuracies or errors. While every effort has been made to ensure the quality and reliability of the data, it is important to recognise that citizen science involves contributions from volunteer who may vary in expertise and resources. Therefore, readers are advised to exercise caution and use the data for informational purposes only. We do not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or suitability of the data for any particular purpose.

Eye on the Reef

An updated Eye on the Reef (EotR) app was released by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in 2024. The new app has been transformed to streamline the experience, being more intuitive and faster than before, while still giving all marine park users a pathway to become citizen scientists and provide valuable data to the Reef Authority and researchers.

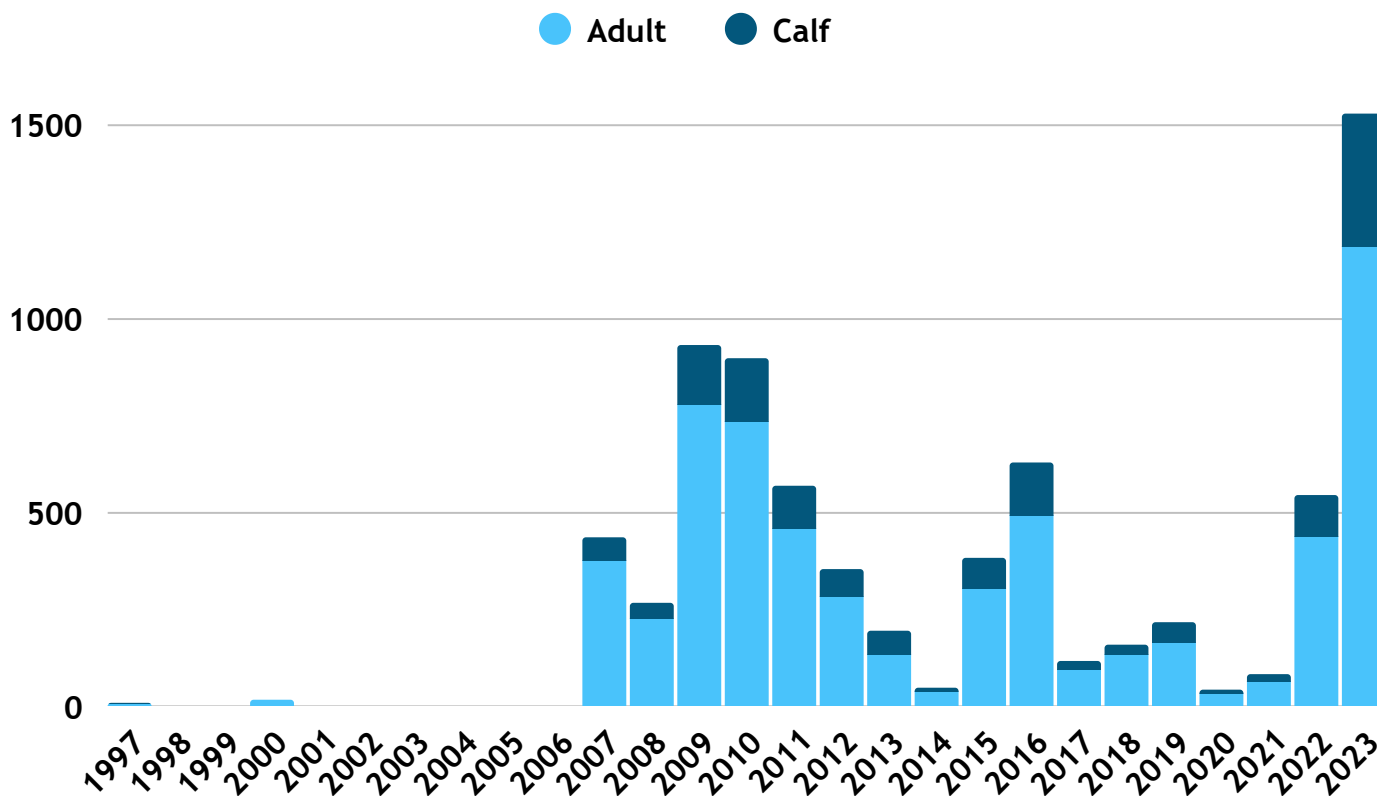
Data was provided by the Commonwealth of Australia acting through the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority - Eye on the Reef program under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) Licence.

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Adult and Calf Humpback Whale Sightings through Eye in the Whitsundays

In 2024, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority presented the Eye on the Reef data on humpback whale sightings in the Whitsundays at our Whale Season Information Night. Sightings started being logged in 1997 when the Eye on the Reef was started, but really geared up in 2007 when the program was expanded. Note that at the time of publishing, 2024 data with this detail was not available.

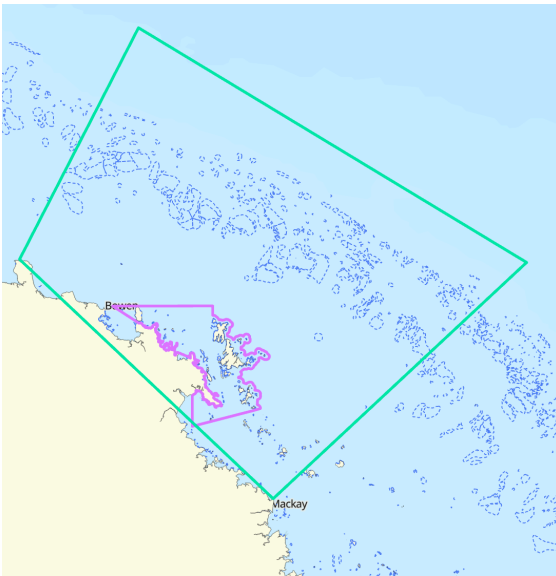
Figure 1: Adult and Calf Humpback Whale Sightings in the Whitsundays from 1997-2023



Whitsunday Region

The Whitsunday region is taken as being the full expanse of the GBRMPA pictured below in green, which includes a large expanse of outer reef and the Whale Protection Area. In our reports, we share data for the full Whitsunday region and also for the Whale Protection Area (purple), which includes the area including the Whitsunday Islands.

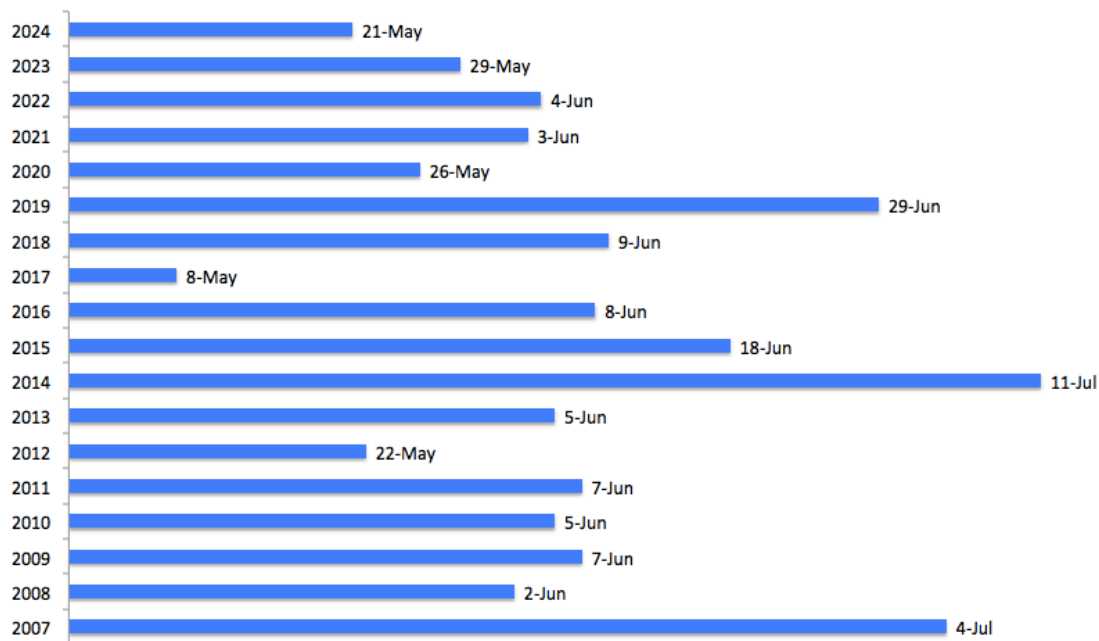
Figure 2: Whitsunday Region vs Whitsunday Whale Protection Area Map



Arrival Date

The first humpback whale sighting for 2024 was at the top of Hook Island by Asher from Red Cat Adventures on the 21st of May. This is the second earliest recorded sighting, with the earliest being 8th of May 2017.

Figure 3: First Recorded Humpback Whale sighting in the Whitsundays by Year (EotR)



Number of Sightings and Number of Citizen Scientists using EYOR in the Whitsundays

In 2024, a total of 423 sightings were logged on EotR by 52 unique people in the Whitsunday region. There were a total of 212 whale sightings in the region, all of them being humpback whales that were reported by 45 people. There were also a total of 20 dolphin sightings reported by 11 people. Note that the sightings could have included pods of multiple whales however this detail is not captured in this dataset.

Figure 4: Whitsunday Region Eye of the Reef Sightings 2024

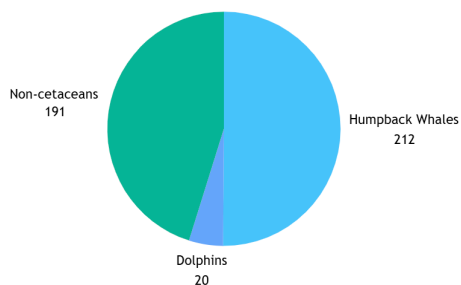
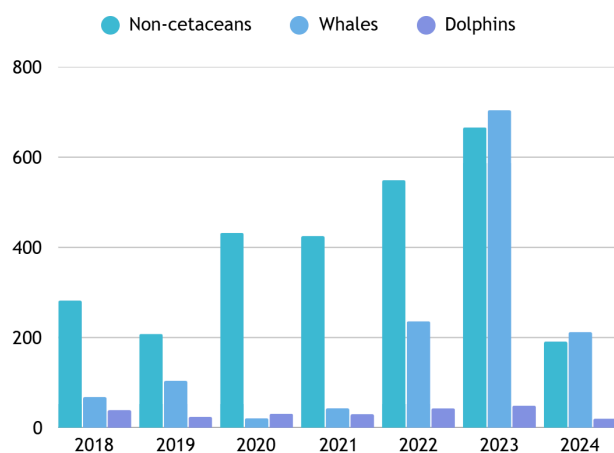


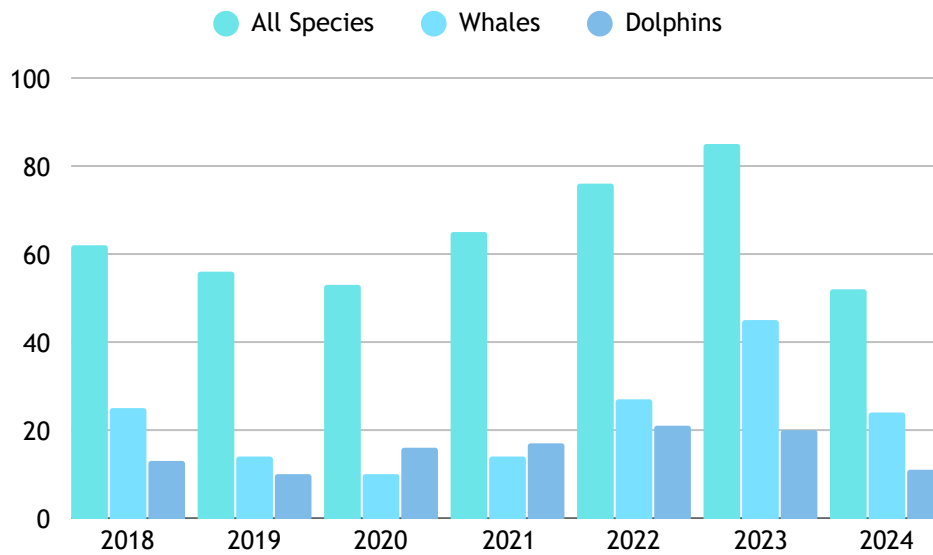
Figure 5: Whitsunday Region Eye of the Reef Sightings by Year



Engagement with Eye on the Reef has decreased in 2024. There were nearly 1000 fewer total sightings logged in 2024 than in 2023. The number of unique reporters also decreased, from 85 in 2023 to 52 in 2024. This data does not reflect the whale season as there was a huge number of whales in the Whitsundays in 2024, more than 2023, with many magical encounters including whales swimming through snorkeling groups. The decrease in data could indicate a shift in community engagement, perhaps due to their being so many whales people stopped reporting them however there were also teething issues with the new EYOR app that may have caused some reporters to be unable to upload their sightings.

Please note: If you are experiencing technical issues with your Eye on the Reef app, please use the in-app support feature or email eyeonthereef@gbrmpa.gov.au with detailed information about what the problem is so it can be resolved as soon as possible.

Figure 6: Whitsunday Region Eye on the Reef App Engagement by Year



Number of Sightings and Number of Citizen Scientists using EYOR in the Whitsundays Whale Heritage Area

The Whitsunday Whale Heritage Area aligns with the Whitsundays Whale Protection Zone (see zoning map 10). In 2023, there were a total of 1027 sightings logged on EotR by 71 different people within the Whitsunday WHA. 421 whale sightings, 419 of them being humpback whales were reported by 37 people. 35 dolphin sightings were reported by 15 people.

Figure 7: Whale Heritage Area Eye on the Reef Sighting 2023

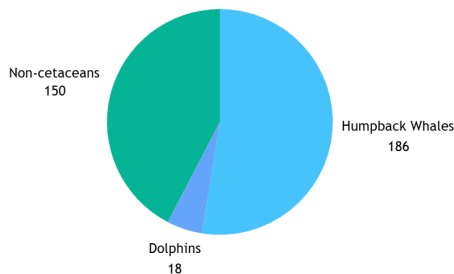
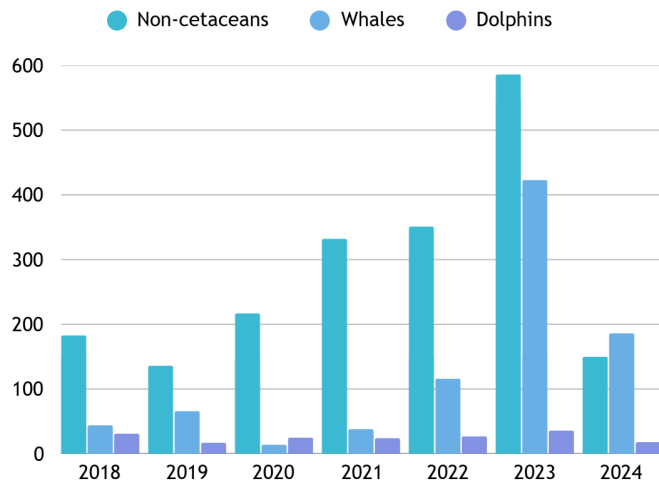
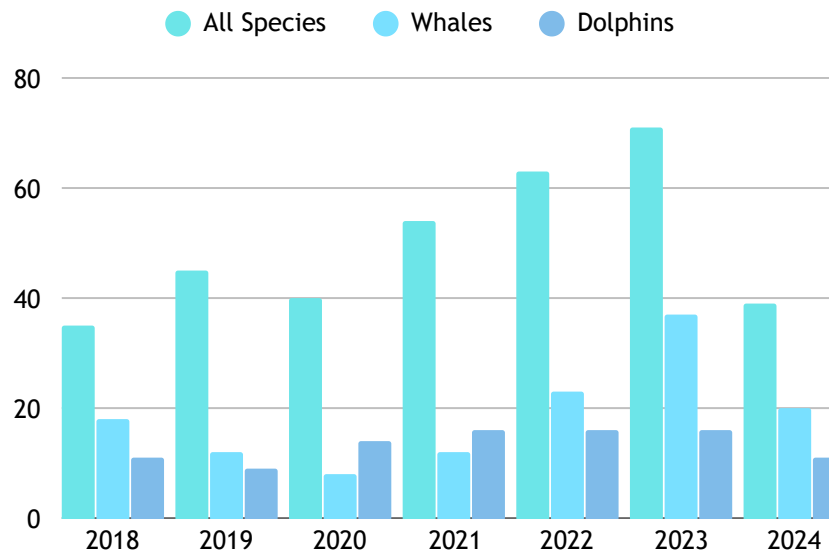


Figure 8: Whale Heritage Area Eye on the Reef App Sightings by Year



Compared to 2022, app engagement has substantially increased within the Whitsunday WHA, with 533 more total sightings logged in 2023, a 107.9% increase. People reporting also increased from 63 to 71 people.

Figure 9: Whitsunday Whale Heritage Area Eye on the Reef App Engagement by Year



Acoustic Monitoring

The University of Queensland's (UQ) Cetacean Ecology Group has been studying the population of humpback whales that migrate along the east coast of Australia for more than 25 years. They focus on a variety of aspects of humpback whale ecology, including monitoring patterns in song.

Together with researchers UQ's Cetacean Ecology Group, we engaged citizen scientists and tourism operators in the Whitsundays to record whale vocalisations and songs with hydrophones - devices used to listen and record underwater sound that can then be read using a spectrogram. These recordings are then contributed to the Humpback Whale Song Long-Term Monitoring Program.

Our contribution will help the Cetacean Ecology Group expand their study along the east coast and help monitor changes in the song that occur yearly.

Hydrophone Training Experience

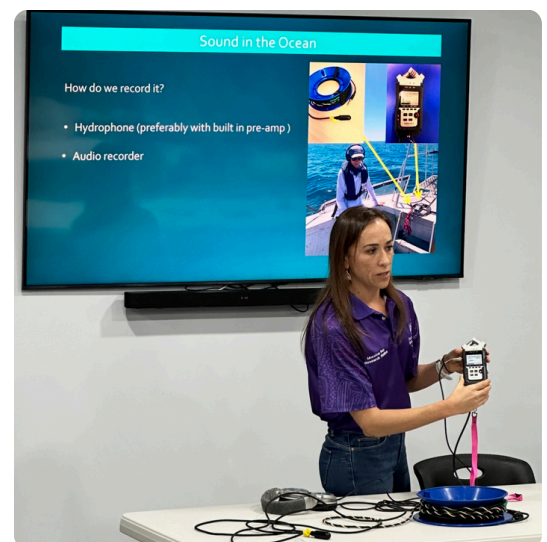
WoW, in collaboration with the University of Queensland's (UQ) Cetacean Ecology Group, held a two-part hydrophone training experience that included a mandatory learning session at the *Whitsunday Sailing Club* and a practical aboard *Viper*, *Iconic Whitsunday Adventures*.

Genevieve Williams, a PhD Candidate from UQ, conducted the hydrophone training for the second year and worked individually with hydrophone owners so they could get the most from their device.

The learning session was open to the public and there were about 25 attendees while there were 12 registered attendees and 5 WoW SC members on the practical day aboard *Viper*, many of whom had purchased their own hydrophone. Attendees on the practical day were fortunate enough not only to see multiple whales, but also to hear live whale social noises through the hydrophone.

The purpose of this experience is to teach locals and tourism operators how to use their hydrophone and encourage contribution to UQ's Humpback Whale Song Long-Term Monitoring Program. Bringing whale song to the surface provides an enriched tourism experience without any impacts to whales.

Watch a video from our day aboard *Viper* [here](#).



HappyWhale

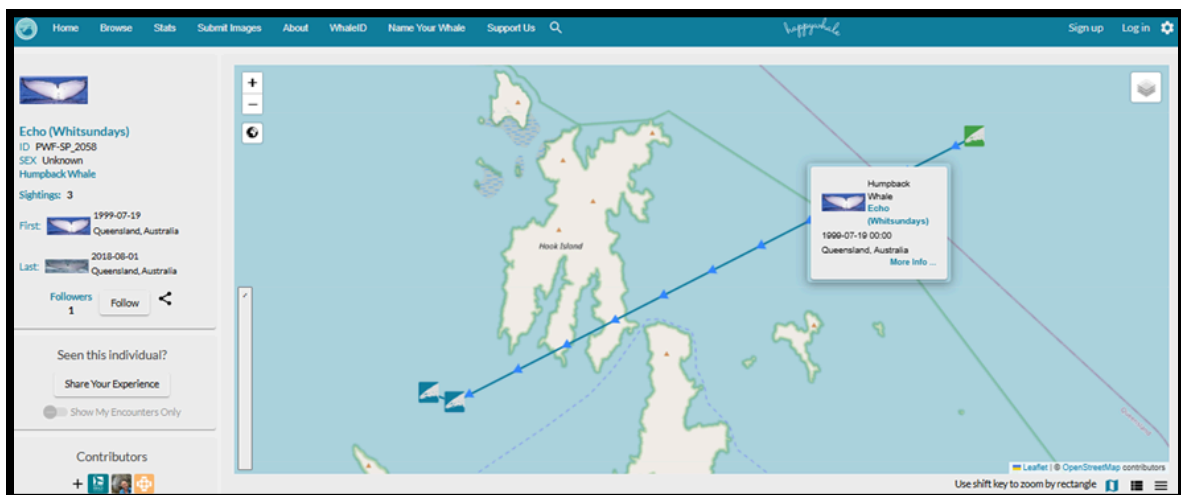
Humpback whales have unique patterns of black and white pigmentation on the undersides of their flukes (tails) that can be used as identification - kind of like a fingerprint. Scientists have used fluke photos to track individuals and to monitor populations since the 1970's. More recently, scientists have begun using AI to match photos with scientific collections that has made global tracking of whales possible.

[HappyWhale](#), the largest individual identification resource ever built for marine mammals, allows citizen scientists to participate in identifying and tracking marine wildlife by submitting fluke images to the dataset. HappyWhale will then provide you information about the whale, such as where it has been sighted in the past, and will give you ongoing updates any time it is sighted in the future. HappyWhale also gives you the opportunity to adopt and name your whale by donating to ocean conservation.

During the 2023 season, WoW encouraged everyone to submit their tail fluke images to HappyWhale. There were six tail fluke images from the Whitsundays logged on HappyWhale in 2023.

Red Cat Adventures named [Echo](#) in 2023. Echo was first pictured in the Whitsundays in July 1999 by Pacific Whale Foundation. Deb Duggan photographed Echo again in August 2018. This shows Echo has been visiting the Whitsundays for almost 20 years! See Echo's mapping from HappyWhale;

Figure 10: Echo's HappyWhale map



Regional Insights

Whale Strike Incidents

With the East coast of Australia population of humpback whales currently estimated to be increasing at 11% per annum, and their numbers having overshot the previously estimated carrying capacity of 40,000 individuals, there is growing concern and need to be aware of risk of whale strikes.

The Department of Energy and Environment's has a [National Strategy for Reducing Vessel Strike on Cetaceans and other Marine Megafauna](#) (2017). is this current?

Whale strike incident information is reported voluntarily to the Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI). While this information is not publicly available, the WoW have been invited to be a part of a steering committee focused on incident reporting.

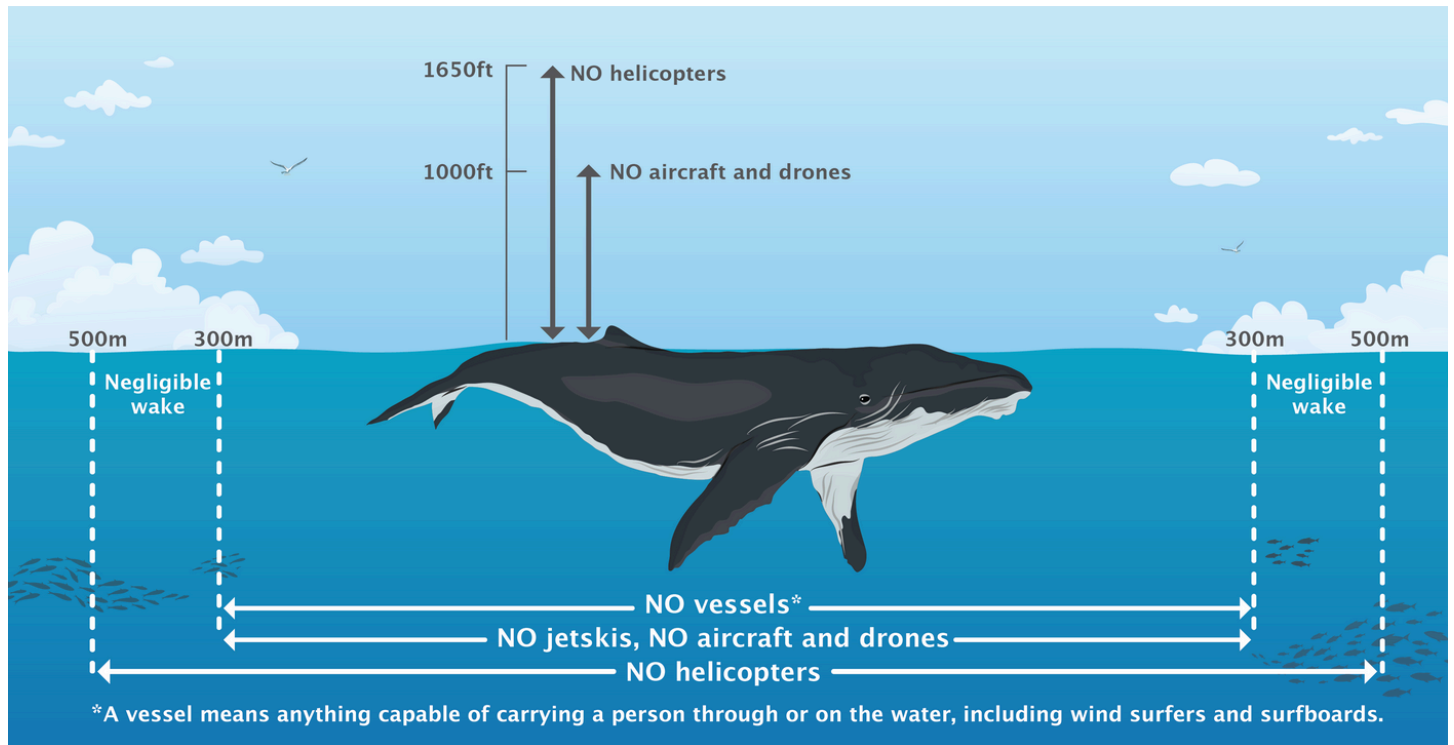
This has been harder to get than expected. The Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI) have provided some useful information and we are still waiting on other departments to provide data. DETSI data shows that in the last five years there have been two verified reported cetaceans within the Whitsunday Plan of Management with propeller damage observed by the reporting member of the public (note that these reports were not substantiated by QPWS).

The WoW has not heard of any whale incidents in the Whitsundays in 2024 through local contacts or our social media channels. This hopefully means we are looking out more and have not collided with any individuals despite the large

numbers in the region this year.

The Pacific Whale Foundation has collected information on whales with evidence of strikes.... % with boat damage, % with fishing gear damage, but some may also have died.....

Regulations in the Whitsunday Whale Protection Area



Strandings

There were no strandings reported in the Whitsundays in 2024. DETSI considers a stranding to include any incident where a marine animal is:

- Aground on a shore; or
- In a helpless state (such as entangled or incapacitated); or
- Sick, injured, or dead (and includes animals at risk of becoming one of these states)

Incidents with whales, such as collisions with propeller strikes, if they had been reported and verified, would be captured in the stranding database. Figure 8 gives details for total number of verified incidents/strandings related to whales in or adjacent to the Whitsunday Whale Protection Area. Matters of compliance, such as reports of people swimming with whales, are not captured in this database.

There have been five verified whale stranding reports over the last six years, four of which occurred in 2023. There are no verified reports of dolphin strandings within the Whitsunday Plan of Management in the last six years.

Figure 11: DETSI verified whale strandings in the Whitsunday Whale Protection Area (and adjacent waters) in the last five years

Date	Species	Activity (at time of report)	Status	Damage	Location
2/08/2022	Undet.	General (swimming, feeding, etc.)	Usure if Alive or Dead	Propeller Damage (unsubstantiated by QPWS, no supporting imagery)	Dent Passage
25/06/2023	Humpback Whale	Beach Washed	Alive, left to natural processes (freed on rising tide)	Undefined anthropogenic injury (unsubstantiated by QPWS, no supporting imagery)	Pinnacle Bay, Hook Island
10/07/2023	Humpback Whale	Floating, offshore	Carcass Poor, advanced decomposition		Between South Molle Island and Planton Island
28/07/2023	Humpback Whale	Beach Washed	Alive but subsequently died	Superficial injuries of predation	Repulse Bay, Intertidal flats off Conway Beach

Post-mortem exams of animals, called necropsies, are arranged and paid for by the Department of Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI) when operationally feasible. Sometimes a necropsy may be warranted due to multiple animals being stranded, circumstances of the stranding being unusual, or the species being listed as vulnerable. Currently, necropsies are prioritised for dugongs, Australian snubfin dolphins, Australian humpback dolphins, and other species in accordance with Reef 2050 and DETSI research priorities. Necropsies were not performed on any of the above strandings and therefore the official cause of death is reported as unknown.

Please note the following caveats with regard to this marine strandings data: *The Department (DETSI) strandings database (StrandNet) is a record of reported verified marine animal strandings and should not be considered as a record of the total strandings/mortality, but a proportion of the total. Strandings/mortality that are unobserved or unverified are not captured in the strandings database. Cause of Death/Stranding relies on the assessment of the incident and/or supporting imagery by trained QPWS staff or veterinarians.*

Looking Forward

We are expecting some big changes in 2025! We are looking at formalising as a not-for-profit incorporated association as Whitsunday Marine Conservation Inc. to give us capability to expand.

We have plans to reach further with our engagement, continue to offer virtual learning sessions and engage more people to becoming stewards of whales and the marine environment as a whole. With the ongoing success of our events, we intend to continue to foster and grow these events to engage more people and offer unique experiences for our community and visitors.

Our Whale Heritage Area designation is reviewed annually so we will be providing an update to the World Cetacean Alliance on our progress to date and plans for the upcoming whale season. The Wildlife Heritage Areas program is growing itself so its a great time to be a part of it!

We will continue to expand our corporate sponsorship program and aim to provide useful tools and information for our sponsors to tap into and use in their businesses. We are also hoping to secure grant funding for a Coordinator for the program.

Contact

For further information, please reach out to us at whitsundaymc@gmail.com and follow us on [Facebook](#).

