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Engage

Couple's lifetime work reveals mystery of Hervey Bay's humpback whales

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A double breach in the Hervey Bay nursery: female humpback Timantha (back) with her calf Elmo (credit: Trish Franklin).

The only rest-stop on the southern migration of humpback whales is crowded at this time of year as a staggering 12,000 females and young detour into Queensland's Hervey Bay.

Drs Trish and Wally Franklin looking through their catalogue of whale fluke images (credit: Luke Marsden).

This phenomenon, now involving approximately a third of the total humpback whale population, has been observed over three decades by Southern Cross University researchers Drs Trish and Wally Franklin.

“Our long-term research reveals that Hervey Bay is a wide shallow bay preferred by mature humpback females, who use the bay as a ‘nursery’ in August by mature females accompanying immature whales and during September and October for mothers with new calves spending time alone with their calves,” Dr Trish Franklin said.

“Hervey Bay is a stopover on the southern journey. The whales spend about two weeks there. This rest-stop is particularly important for the calves and younger humpback whales, providing an ideal nurturing ground that may be contributing to the high survival rates.”

The naturally curious calves have lots of energy and no fear. The mothers nudge the calves into the shallows to show them how avoid beaching, and teach them when situations are safe or dangerous.

That the bay is a mostly male-free zone is important, the pair discovered.

“Our work has also shown Hervey Bay is important social hub for the whales, resulting in lower levels of competitive group behaviour and fewer male escorts, giving mothers with calves more time alone involved in maternal activity,” said Dr Trish Franklin.

This year approximately 35,000 humpback whales are on the great migration along the east coast of Australia. The southern leg sees the cetaceans leave the warm tropical waters of the Great Barrier Reef to return to the cold waters of the Antarctic to feed on krill.

Humpback whale numbers overall have steadily increased since the international moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982.

During the Franklin’s three-decade long research trips to Hervey Bay the pair has produced significant research, published 26 scientific papers, taken more than 500,000 photos and earned doctorates from Southern Cross University.

The 30-year milestone is also significant because it’s the age, scientists believe, of the albino humpback whale known as Migaloo which the pair has a special relationship with.

"We first set eyes on Migaloo in 1992 and again in 1993 near Hervey Bay. Then in 1998 we recorded him 'singing', a behaviour typical of male whales around nine years old," said Dr Wally Franklin.

"It was our Southern Cross University colleague Dr Dan Burns and his team who first collected skin samples of Migaloo in October 2004 near Ballina, which confirmed the whale's gender."

In recognition of their work, Drs Trish and Wally Franklin have been announced as the keynote speakers on day one of the World Whale Conference (8-11 October). Organised by the UK-based World Cetacean Alliance (WCA) and co-hosted by Fraser Coast Tourism and Events, the conference will be held for the first time in Hervey Bay.

The Franklins are also part of the bid by Fraser Coast Tourism & Events for Hervey Bay to be designated the world's first Whale Heritage Site. The decision rests in the hands of the World Cetacean Alliance which is assessing the merits of more than a dozen locations around the globe. The Franklins hope a decision may be announced at the World Whale Conference.

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