

[1] "[Caperea marginata](#) — Pygmy Right Whale
Glossary SPRAT Profile For information to assist regulatory considerations, refer to Policy Statements and Guidelines, the Conservation Advice, the Listing Advice and/or the Recovery Plan. EPBC Legal Status and Documents Top EPBC Act Listing Status Cetacean Listed migratory - EPBC Act, Bonn Approved Conservation Advice There is no approved Conservation Advice for this species Listing Advice There is no Listing Advice for this species Adopted/Made Recovery Plans There is no adopted or made Recovery Plan for this species Adopted/Made Threat Abatement Plans Department of the Environment and Energy (2018). Threat Abatement Plan for the impacts of marine debris on the vertebrate wildlife of Australia's coasts and oceans (2018). Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia. Available from: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/marine-debris-2018>. In effect under the EPBC Act from 21-Jul-2018. Other Commonwealth Documents Top Other EPBC Act Plans South-east marine region profile: A description of the ecosystems, conservation values and uses of the South-east Marine Region (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015) [Information Sheet]. Policy Statements and Guidelines Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2017 (Department of the Environment and Energy, 2017) [Admin Guideline]. Industry Guidelines on the Interaction between offshore seismic exploration and whales (Department of the Environment and Water Resources (DEW), 2007) [Admin Guideline]. Federal Register of Legislative Instruments Migratory: Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 - Amendment to the List of Migratory Species (03/12/2002) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002d) [Legislative Instrument] Threat Abatement Plan: Instrument under section 270B of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 to make a Threat Abatement Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018i) [Legislative Instrument] State Listing Status SA: Listed as Rare (National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 (South Australia): Rare species: January 2020 list) Non-statutory Listing Status IUCN: Listed as Least Concern (Global Status: IUCN Red List of Threatened Species: 2020.2 list) NGO: Listed as Data Deficient (The action plan for Australian mammals 2012) Naming Top Scientific name *Caperea marginata* [39] Family Neobalaenidae: Cetacea: Mammalia: Chordata: Animalia Species author (Gray, 1846) Infraspecies author Reference Distribution Map Top Distribution map The distribution shown is generalised from the Departments Species of National Environmental Significance dataset. This is an indicative distribution map of the present distribution of the species based on best available knowledge. Some species information is withheld in line with sensitive species polices. See map caveat for more information. Illustrations Top Google Images Other Links, Including Superseded Commonwealth Documents Top Commonwealth of Australia (2002d). Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 - Amendment to the List of Migratory Species (03/12/2002). F2007B00765. Canberra: Federal Register of Legislative Instruments. Available from: <http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2007B00765>. Department of the Environment and Heritage (2005e). Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching. Available from: <http://www.environment.gov.au/resource/australian-national-guidelines-whale-and-dolphin-watching-2005>. Department of the Environment and Heritage (2006eq). *Caperea marginata* in Species Profile and Threats (SPRAT) database. Canberra: DEH. Available from: http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=39. Newsletters Top EPBC Act email updates can be received via the Communities for Communities newsletter and the EPBC Act newsletter. Caveat Top This database is

designed to provide statutory, biological and ecological information on species and ecological communities, migratory species, marine species, and species and species products subject to international trade and commercial use protected under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (the EPBC Act). It has been compiled from a range of sources including listing advice, recovery plans, published literature and individual experts. While reasonable efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information, no guarantee is given, nor responsibility taken, by the Commonwealth for its accuracy, currency or completeness. The Commonwealth does not accept any responsibility for any loss or damage that may be occasioned directly or indirectly through the use of, or reliance on, the information contained in this database. The information contained in this database does not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth. This database is not intended to be a complete source of information on the matters it deals with. Individuals and organisations should consider all the available information, including that available from other sources, in deciding whether there is a need to make a referral or apply for a permit or exemption under the EPBC Act.

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Where available the sections below provide a biological profile for the species. Biological profiles vary in age and content across species, some are no longer being updated and are retained as archival content. These profiles are still displayed as they contain valuable information for many species. The Profile Update section below indicates when the biological profile was last updated for some species. For information to assist regulatory considerations, please refer to Conservation Advice, the Recovery Plan, Policy Statements and Guidelines.

Profile Update
Top

The following detailed profile was last updated on 25 September 2008.

Australian and State/Territory Government Legal Status
Top

The current conservation status of the

Pygmy Right Whale, *Caperea marginata*, under Australian Government legislation and under international conventions is as follows:

National: Listed as a Cetacean, and a Migratory species, under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

International:

- Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS/BONN): Appendix II.
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES): Appendix I.
- International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN): Classified as Insufficiently Known/Data Deficient.

Taxonomy
Top

Scientific name: *Caperea marginata*
Common name: Pygmy Right Whale

The Pygmy Right Whale is considered to be a conventionally accepted species. However, it has been periodically placed either in its own monospecific family, Neobalaenidae, or in the family Balaenidae. Recent studies combining genetics and morphology have concluded that Neobalaenidae is the most appropriate family for this species (Bannister et al. 1996). No subspecies are currently described or recognised (Rice 1998).

Description
Top

The Pygmy Right Whale is the smallest and least conspicuous baleen whale (Kemper 2002a), resulting in it being one of the least known species. However, current research by Australian scientists is expanding the understanding of this species (Dawbin & Cato 1986; Kemper 2002b; Kemper & Leppard 1999).

The Pygmy Right Whale is the only right whale with a dorsal fin. This fin is falcate (sickle-shaped) and set about two-thirds of the way back from the snout tip (Jefferson et al. 1993). This species is atypical of right whales in other ways as well: it is rather slender, resembling more the streamlined rorquals in body shape (Baker 1985), and its head accounts for less than one quarter of its body length (Jefferson et al. 1993). Although the Pygmy Right Whale has the arched jawline, with the upper jaw curving down towards the tip, of other right whales, the arch is not as pronounced as in other species. The flippers are small and slender with rounded tips. There are two shallow throat creases (Ross et al. 1975), reminiscent of those in Gray Whales (Leatherwood & Reeves 1983).

The colour of the body is dark grey above, ranging to white below (Ross et al. 1975). There is a dark eyepatch and an indistinct grey chevron across the back behind the blowhole (Kemper 2002b). The flippers and tail flukes are dark grey above and paler below (Kemper 2002b). The colour of the baleen plates is yellowish-white with a narrow, dark brown marginal band on the external edge that is diagnostic for the species and is the basis for its specific name (*marginata*: latin for "having a margin") (Baker 1985).

Pygmy Right Whales are 2 m at birth, and wean when they are 3.0-3.5 m. Most Pygmy Right Whales are physically mature at around 6 m, while maximum length and weight are 6.5 m and 3430 kg. Female Pygmy Right Whales are slightly longer than males (Kemper 2002b). Less than 20 sightings of Pygmy Right Whales 'at sea' have been recorded, most of which have been of one or two animals, but some

of up to 10 individuals (Kemper 2002b). One sighting of 80 individuals was recorded in oceanic waters just south of the Subtropical Convergence (Matsuoka et al. 1996).

Australian Distribution

Top Records of Pygmy Right Whales in Australian waters are distributed between 32° S and 47° S, but are not uniformly spread around the coast (Kemper 2002a). The northern distribution of Pygmy Right Whales may be limited on the west and east coasts of Australia by the warm, south-flowing Leeuwin and East Australian currents (Kemper 2002a). Few or no records are available for NSW, eastern Victoria, and the northern part of the Great Australian Bight, while Western Australia has fewer records than comparative eastern Australian states (Kemper 2002a). Concentrations of stranded animals have occurred at the entrance of the gulfs in South Australia and around Tasmania, but live sightings have predominated in the former region (Kemper 2002a). The numerous strandings in Tasmania may be due to the proximity of the Subtropical Convergence, an apparently important feeding zone for Pygmy Right Whales.

Areas of coastal upwelling events appear to be an important component regulating Pygmy Right Whale distribution (Kemper 2002a), but further offshore it appears that the Subtropical Convergence may be an important area for sub adult and adult Pygmy Right Whales (Kemper 2002a; Matsuoka et al. 1996).

The current extent of occurrence for Pygmy Right Whales is estimated to be greater than 20 000 km² (based on the Australian Economic Exclusion Zone <200 nautical mile (nm), including subantarctic waters down to about 47° S) (Peddemors & Harcourt 2006, pers. comm.). Increasing ocean temperatures predicted by climate change scenarios could potentially decrease the extent of occurrence, with warmer water extending southwards along both coasts.

The area of occupancy of Pygmy Right Whales cannot be calculated due to the paucity of records for pelagic waters off Australia and the subAntarctic. However, it is likely to be greater than 2000 km² (Peddemors & Harcourt 2006, pers. comm.). Future expansion of high-seas pelagic gillnet fisheries may result in increased interactions with Pygmy Right Whales, including incidental catches and injury, potentially reducing local populations and thus leading to a decrease in area of occupancy (Lewinson et al. 2004).

Global Distribution

Top The Pygmy Right Whale is found in temperate and sub-Antarctic waters of the Southern Hemisphere between about 19 °C and 52 °C (Kemper 2002b).

There are no estimates of the global population size of Pygmy Right Whales. Similarly, no information exists regarding trends of the Pygmy Right Whale population. However, given that the species has never been hunted commercially it is considered likely that they are not severely threatened (Cetacean Specialist Group 1996; Kemper 2002b) The relationship between Australian and international populations of Pygmy Right Whales is not known. There is no evidence of large-scale movements similar to those seen for other balaenopterids, but there may be some southern movement (south of 41° S) by juvenile Pygmy Right Whales (Kemper 2002a). The lack of data for Pygmy Right Whales leads to an inability to assess whether global threats would affect the Australian population, but populations are not currently considered to be globally threatened (Kemper 2002b; Reeves et al. 2003).

Surveys Conducted

Top Pygmy Right Whales are not well surveyed within Australian waters. Their distribution is primarily assumed from incidental sightings, plus beach-cast animals, for all areas.

Population Information

Top No population estimates are available for Pygmy Right Whales globally, or in Australian waters. There is some suggestion that adults may be much more numerous in southern latitudes than the stranding records suggest (Kemper 2002a). The relative frequency of strandings (about two or three per year), in South Australia and Tasmania suggests that the species may be most abundant in waters off these states (Bannister et al. 1996; Kemper 2002a).

Extreme fluctuations are unlikely as Australasian records of Pygmy Right Whales show no evidence of large-scale movements, with records of live and dead animals made along the coasts throughout the year (Kemper 2002a).

The generation length for Pygmy Right Whales is unknown, but may be around 15 years based on the reproductive potential of other balaenids (Best et al. 2004c).

Key localities for Pygmy Right Whales identified by Bannister and colleagues (1996) include Bass Strait, south-eastern Tasmania, Kangaroo Island, southern Eyre Peninsula and possibly south-western Western Australia. These areas are all close to habitats rich in marine life and possibly the zooplankton upon which the Pygmy Right Whale feeds (e.g. copepods and euphausiids) (Bannister et al. 1996).

Land Tenure of Populations

Top All cetaceans are protected within the Australian Whale Sanctuary under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. The Sanctuary includes all Commonwealth waters from the 3 nm state waters limit out to the boundary of the Exclusive Economic Zone (i.e. out to 200 nm and further in some places). Pygmy Right Whales are also subject to International Whaling Commission (IWC) regulations and protected within the Indian Ocean Sanctuary and Southern Ocean Sanctuary.

Habitat

Pygmy Right Whales have primarily been recorded in areas associated with upwellings and with high zooplankton abundance, particularly copepods and small euphausiids which constitute their main prey (Kemper 2002a; Sekiguchi et al. 1992). There is some evidence to indicate that the area south of 41° S is important for weaned Pygmy Right Whales, possibly because of the higher prey abundance in these waters (Kemper 2002a). A paucity of sightings of live Pygmy Right Whales has led to a limited understanding of the species' non-biological habitat. They appear to have a circumpolar distribution, preferring water temperatures of between 5 °C and 20 °C (Baker 1985) and staying north of the Antarctic Convergence (Ross et al. 1975). Pygmy Right Whales do not appear to be deep divers, as recorded dive times are short (Matsuoka et al. 1996; Ross et al. 1975), implying that they primarily inhabit the pelagic zone of oceanic waters.

Pygmy Right Whales have been seen in sheltered shallow bays, but it appears that these are predominantly juveniles and sub-adults. This appears to be normal behaviour and is not thought to represent animals that are sick or preparing to strand (Ross et al. 1975). Strandings and sightings of live animals have often been linked to areas of either coastal upwelling or areas of increased plankton production, such as the Subtropical Convergence (Kemper 2002a).

Life Cycle

Extremely limited life history data exists for the Pygmy Right Whale, and no age estimates have been made (Kemper 2002b). Pygmy Right Whales reach sexual maturity at lengths greater than 5 m, but age at sexual maturity is unknown (Kemper 2002b). The Pygmy Right Whale calving interval, mating season, and gestation period are all unknown (Kemper 2002b). The calving season is protracted, possibly year-round, although Pavey (1992) suggest a broad calving season between May and January in Australian waters (Kemper 2002a). As only one sighting of a small calf with its (presumed) mother has been made, at about 35° S in South Australia, it is not possible to delineate a calving ground. Neonate strandings have occurred throughout the known Australian range for Pygmy Right Whales, but Kemper (2002a) suggests it most likely that calves would be born in warmer waters of lower latitudes.

There are no known reproductive behaviours that may make Pygmy Right Whales specifically vulnerable to threatening processes. However a calving interval of at least three years, based on that of the Southern Right Whale (Bannister et al. 1996), leads to a slow reproductive capacity.

Feeding

Calanoid copepods and small euphausiids feature predominantly in all Pygmy Right Whale stomachs examined, whether they are from oceanic specimens (Budylenko et al. 1973; Ivashin et al. 1972) or stranded animals (Guiler 1978; Kemper 2002a; Sekiguchi et al. 1992). Sekiguchi and colleagues (1992) suggest that this species uses a surface skimming feeding behaviour, based on found feathers and a small plastic bag in the stomachs of Pygmy Right Whales examined in South Africa. Arnold (1987 as cited in Kemper 2002a) observed a juvenile Pygmy Right Whale apparently feeding on calanoid copepods and euphausiid larvae in Portland Harbour, western Victoria.

Movement Patterns

There is no evidence of large-scale movements of Australian Pygmy Right Whales, with strandings recorded throughout the year (Pavey 1992). Young Pygmy Right Whales appear to be restricted to shallower coastal waters (Kemper 2002a), possibly moving between areas of coastal upwelling. Ross and colleagues (1975) postulated an inshore movement of Pygmy Right Whale juveniles off South Africa during the spring and summer months as part of a more general dispersal of animals after weaning. However, off Australia it appears that weaned juveniles head south of 41 °C into waters with higher prey abundance (Kemper 2002a). No information is available regarding daily movement patterns of Pygmy Right Whales. Considerably more data is required before the timing and pattern of movements in this species become clear.

Survey Guidelines

Distinctiveness

The diagnostic characters of the Pygmy Right Whale are the presence of an arched jawline and a falcate dorsal fin, of which the former can inevitably only be confirmed at close range. Pygmy Right Whales appear to be reasonably curious and may approach a stationary boat (Matsuoka et al. 1996), or can be approached by boat or swimmer (Ross et al. 1975). This characteristic would allow identification of the species.

Detectability

Pygmy Right Whales are not very distinctive when viewed at sea. The blow on surfacing is small and often inconspicuous, while the time spent on the surface is usually not longer than four to five seconds (Ivashin et al. 1972; Ross et al. 1975). On surfacing, the head and blow appear before the dorsal fin (Matsuoka et al. 1996) and the dorsal fin is often not even exposed during surfacing (Ross et al. 1975). This inconspicuous behaviour tends to make Pygmy Right Whales relatively difficult to observe, probably accounting for the rarity in sightings for this species (Ross et al. 1975). The similarities between this species and the Minke Whale probably mean that some records are incorrectly identified (Ivashin et al. 1972).

Pygmy Right Whales travel alone, or in small groups of up to eight individuals, distributed over an area of 2 to 3 square miles (Ivashin et al. 1972). One record was made of a group of approximately 80 individuals approximately 420 nm south of Cape Leeuwin, southwestern Australia just south of the

Subtropical Convergence (Matsuoka et al. 1996). Pygmy Right Whales travel at speeds of 3 to 5 knots (Kemper 2002b), with a fairly regular respiratory rhythm of between 40 and 60 seconds between breaths (Ross et al. 1975).

Recommended Methods

Cetacean surveys are constrained by several important factors including weather (sea state and light conditions), area to be covered, aim of the survey (abundance estimate v/s ecological studies), the activities of the animals themselves (travelling, resting, surface v/s deep feeding), and the type of craft used for the survey.

Surveys for oceanic cetaceans such as Pygmy Right Whales have primarily been boat-based transects, although a series of aerial surveys flown off Albany, Western Australia, (Bannister 1968) were specific for cetaceans, particularly the Sperm Whale. Other than this, there have been almost no dedicated cetacean surveys conducted in continental Australian waters. During non-dedicated surveys, a minimum requirement is to record all cetacean sightings encountered with corresponding GPS position, environmental data (sea conditions and habitat) and behavioural observations. From fishing vessels, all incidentally caught animals should be recorded with corresponding GPS position, and basic biological information from dead animals should be obtained (V. Peddemors 2006, pers. comm.).

Threats

Pygmy Right Whales have never been the object of a directed fishery, as were other baleen whales, but were probably taken opportunistically (Bannister et al. 1996). Historical anthropogenic mortalities include a small number of Pygmy Right Whales that were taken for scientific study, plus some incidental captures in nets in South Africa and South Australia (Bannister et al. 1996).

Pygmy Right Whales are considered to be unlikely to be seriously affected by toxic contaminants (Kemper et al. 1994) because of their apparent offshore distribution near the Subtropical Convergence, and diet based primarily on copepods and small euphausiids (Kemper 2002a).

A potential threat to Pygmy Right Whales is entanglement in drift-nets set outside Australian Territorial Waters and in lost or discarded netting (Bannister et al. 1996), particularly considering the increasing fishing in pelagic waters.

Threat Abatement and Recovery

Bannister and colleagues (1996) and Ross (2006) recommended the following actions be taken to better understand the threats to Pygmy Right Whales:

- Determine the distribution and monitor abundance of Pygmy Right Whales in Australian waters, with particular emphasis on the areas off south-west Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and southern NSW. This should be done via a series of aerial surveys and, perhaps, a vessel-based sighting program to monitor numbers. There should be consideration to pool existing sightings and strandings data to locate possible concentration areas.
- Reporting and salvage of Pygmy Right Whale specimens incidentally caught or stranded; and ensuring specimens are made available to appropriate scientific museums to enable collection of life history data and tissue samples for genetic analysis.
- Determine nursery/calving areas to assess importance of Australian waters for Pygmy Right Whale reproduction and implement relevant management protocols.
- Determine the main feeding grounds and whether Pygmy Right Whales are resident or migratory in order to assess impact of threats outside Australian waters.
- Determine taxonomic relationships of Pygmy Right Whales with other major localities in Southern Hemisphere.
- Ensure adequate protection of the species and its resources in Australian and nearby waters.
- Conduct disentanglement workshops, particularly for offshore fishers, and develop suitable Action plans.

Current projects initiated to address these threats include a requirement to report all incidental catches made within the Australian Exclusive Economic Zone (Bannister et al. 1996).

The Department of the Environment and Heritage (2005c) has also produced The Southern Right Whale Recovery Plan 2005 - 2010.

Mitigation Approach

Management Documentation

The Action Plan for Australian Cetaceans (Bannister et al. 1996) provides a brief overview of the Pygmy Right Whale, and some management recommendations for the species. In addition, Industry Guidelines on the Interaction between offshore seismic exploration and whales (DEW 2007h), and Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching (DEH 2005e) have been published.

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