

# Fact Sheet: Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises



Bottlenose dolphins  
Photo: WSPA

**D**olphins, porpoises, and whales belong to the mammalian order cetacea (pronounced sa-tay-sha) – meaning that dolphins and porpoises are really just small whales! Cetaceans are found in every ocean in the world and there are even some freshwater dolphins in Asia and South America. They are mammals, meaning they breathe air with lungs, have a few whiskers or hairs at some stage of their life, give birth to live young, and nurse their offspring with milk they produce. Cetaceans are split into two main suborders: **Mysticetes** and **Odontocetes**.

## MYSTICETES

According to NOAA's National Marine Fisheries (NMFS), there are 11 species of mysticetes, or baleen whales. Baleen whales are commonly called the "great whales". The blue, fin, humpback whale, and gray whale are some examples. Instead of teeth

*Humpback whale feeding . Notice the baleen hanging down from the upper jaw (Photo: Adam & Tess)*

like the odontocetes, mysticetes have baleen plates that hang down from their upper jaw. Baleen is made from a fibrous protein called keratin (same protein hair and fingernails are made from). Baleen is used to filter food out of the water – they take in large amounts of water (which includes bait fish or plankton), then they push the water back out through the baleen capturing the food in the bristles of the baleen.

Compared to odontocetes, mysticetes are typically larger, slower, and are relatively solitary (except mom/calf pairs, feeding groups, and some other special circumstances). They also have a double-blowhole on top of their head and females are generally larger than males. They're also thought to generate low frequency sounds to communicate over long distances.



*Double blowhole of a humpback whale (Photo: WSPA)*

The blue whale, the largest mysticete, weighs up to 180 tons (180000 kg) and can be over 100 ft (33 m) long. The smallest mysticete, the pygmy right whale, weighs around 3 tons (3400 kg) and reaches about 20 ft (6.5 m) in length.

## ODONTOCETES

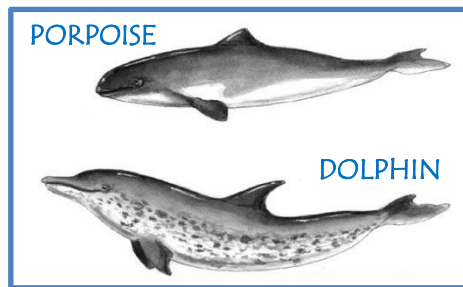
According to NOAA's NMFS, there are 67 species of odontocetes, or toothed whales, such as dolphins and porpoises. Odontocetes have teeth to grasp individual prey; however they usually swallow fish whole.

Compared to mysticetes, odontocetes are typically smaller, faster, and are highly social animals that travel in pods. They have a single blowhole and males are generally larger than females. Odontocetes also have the ability to echolocate, a communication method where they project high frequency clicking sounds out into their environment and listen to the returning echo. The echo helps toothed whales "see" with sound so they can find food, navigate underwater, and communicate with other pod members.

The sperm whale, the largest odontocete, weighs around 57 tons (57000 kg) and reaches about 60 ft (18 m) in length. The orca (killer whale) is the largest dolphin. Hector's dolphin, weighs around 125 lb (57 kg) and reaches between 4-5 ft (1.2-1.5 m) in length.

## PORPOISES VS. DOLPHINS

Although both are odontocetes, dolphins and porpoises are two different types of animals. Porpoises belong to the family Phocoenidae, are generally smaller than dolphins, and have small spade-like teeth, a triangular dorsal fin, and no beak. Dolphins primarily belong to the family Delphinidae, are usually larger, and have large conical teeth, a hooked dorsal fin, and a prominent beak.



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## STATUS OF CETACEANS

In the U.S., all cetaceans are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Endangered cetaceans are further protected under the Endangered Species Act.



Humpback Whale

Photo: WSPA



Spinner Dolphins

Photo: NOAA/NMFS/SWFSC



Harbor Porpoise

Photo: Erik Christensen, Porkeri