

Whale Comprehension

The whale is an extremely huge sea animal. The blue whale is considered the largest creature on Earth today. In fact, the blue whale is much bigger than the prehistoric dinosaurs, some of which weighed almost 50 tons. The estimated weight of the blue whale is twice that of the dinosaurs and it can grow to lengths of 100 feet or more.

The whale looks very much like a huge fish. Contrary to popular belief, the whale is not a fish but a mammal which has adapted itself to living permanently in water. All whales can be divided into two groups : the baleen whales and the toothed whales.

The baleen whales do not have teeth. Instead, they have enormous whalebone sieves known as baleens in their mouths to strain the tiny organisms that they swallow when they close their mouths. The blue whale is an example of a baleen whale. The huge blue whale feeds on tiny sea creatures such as small fishes and shrimps. Female baleen whales are always larger than the males.

The toothed whales, as their name suggests, have teeth in their mouths. Examples of toothed whales are the sperm whales and the killer whales. The sperm whale is the largest member of the toothed whale family. It is called such due to the valuable sperm oil deposit found in its head. At one time, the sperm whale was widely hunted for this oil which was used to make candles. The sperm whale feeds on giant squids, fish and even other sharks. It is quite aggressive by nature but is not as fierce as the killer whale. Killer whales have been known to charge at boats without provocation. They feed on seals, porpoises, polar bears and walruses. When there is a shortage of food, the killer whales will even attack much larger whales. In terms of size, the toothed whales are opposite to the baleen whales, with the males being larger.

Although whales live in water, these mammals breathe in air through their lungs. A whale takes in oxygen when it is at the surface of the water. With this supply of oxygen, it can remain under water for more than an hour. When it resurfaces to replenish its supply of air, it will discharge the used air from its lungs with a tremendous force. The air that is discharged will rise to a great height due to this force. A column of steam or spray is formed as the whale exhales. This is because the air from the whale's lungs is saturated with water vapour at a higher temperature and the cold air outside condenses this vapour. Sometimes, a whale may 'blow' before its nostrils are completely above the surface of the water. When this happens, the sea water is also forced out with the exhaled air and it gushes up like a fountain.

All species of whales give birth to their young alive, usually one at a time. Some of these baby whales are gargantuan. A blue whale at birth weighs something like four tons. Whales suckle their young just like other mammals. A baby blue whale is capable of drinking half a ton of its mother's rich, thick milk.

Although whales are massive in size, they are one of the most graceful animals in the oceans. Unfortunately, like many animals on Earth, whales are in danger of extinction. For many years, man has hunted them for oil and other materials. This has steadily dwindled their numbers. Sometimes, we also hear of hundreds of whales being stranded on beaches and suffocating to death. Without the buoyancy of water, their great weight crushes their lungs and kills them. In an effort to curb extinction, many governments have banned whaling and have taken positive steps towards the conservation of whales.

1. What kind of animal is a whale?
2. What are the two main types of whale?
3. How do whales breathe underwater?
4. What problem do whales (and many other animals) face today?
5. Why do you think the author compares the size and weight of whales to prehistoric dinosaurs?
6. Why is 'killer whale' an appropriate name for this species of whale?
7. Why do you think the author explains that whales are mammals and not fish?
8. Why do you think people want to stop whales from becoming extinct?
9. 'Some of these baby whales are gargantuan'. What does this tell you about new-born whales?
10. Can you research and find any other mammals which live predominantly in the sea?