

# Killer whale *Orcinus orca*



Bóghvítuhvalir 
 Aarluk 
 Háhyrningur 
 Spekkhogger 
 Fahkon 
 Spækhugger



Two orcas underwater © Andy Schmid

Killer whales, or orcas, are among the most well-known **top predators** in the marine environment. These remarkable animals are easily recognisable by their distinctive black and white colouring. As a **cosmopolitan species**, killer whales can be found in all the world's oceans. Some killer whale **populations** feed exclusively on fish, such as salmon, while others specialise in hunting marine mammals, like seals or even other dolphins. These populations also employ highly specialised strategies to hunt their particular **prey**, showcasing the incredible adaptability of this species.

**Adult length** 8 metres  
**Adult weight** 6,000 kg  
**Maximum age** 50 years  
**Eats** bony fish, sharks, pinnipeds, other cetaceans, seabirds, reptiles and squid

**Group size** 2 to 20  
**Predators** no natural predators  
**IUCN status** least concern (2023)  
**NA abundance** 14,000-15,000  
**Hunted in** 29 orcas/year mean 2019-2023

## Main threats:



Pollution



Habitat degradation



Entanglement



Noise disturbance

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Killer whales are highly social animals, living in complex societies that have enabled different **ecotypes** to develop distinct "languages", cultures, lifestyles, and even **genomes**. While the structure of the **pods** and the bonds between individuals can vary from one group to another, orcas typically live in **pods** ranging from a few to over 20 individuals, often spanning three to four related generations. These societies are **matriarchal**, with the oldest female serving as the pod's leader.



Killer whale pod © Fernando Ugarte



Two adult killer whales with a calf © Eve Jourdain / Norwegian Orca Survey

Because orcas share such strong bonds within the **pods**, they often engage in complex behaviours, such as cooperative hunting and playful interactions. They communicate not only with **pod** members but also with other **pods** using an array of **clicks**, **whistles**, and **pulses**. These **vocalisations** are distinct from one pod to another and allows family members to recognise themselves. Mother and **calf** pairs also have special **clicks** that could be considered as "names" to help them stay connected in big groups or in low visibility conditions.



**Research:** Depending on where they live, different killer whale **pods** employ different hunting strategies. What are some examples of cooperative hunting strategies where whole **pod** participates in the hunt?