

Pilot whale *Globicephala melas*



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A fast swimming long-finned pilot whale © Adam Li / NOAA/NMFS/SWFSC

Pilot whales are known for their large, round heads and their strong social bonds. While family groups typically number between 10 and 20 animals, it is not uncommon to see temporary aggregations of several hundreds. They get their name from the old belief among North Atlantic peoples that a “pilot” guided the group. This knowledge was then used to drive them into shallow bays to hunt them, a tradition that still exists today in the Faroe Islands, known as the “grindadráp”.

Adult length 6.3 metres
Adult weight 2,000 kg
Maximum age 60 years
Eats squid, small/medium fish,
Group size 10-200

Predators killer whales, large sharks
IUCN status least concern (2023)
NA abundance 380,000
Hunted in 661 whales/year
 mean 2019-2023 308 whales/year

Main threats:



Climate change



Entanglement



Noise disturbance



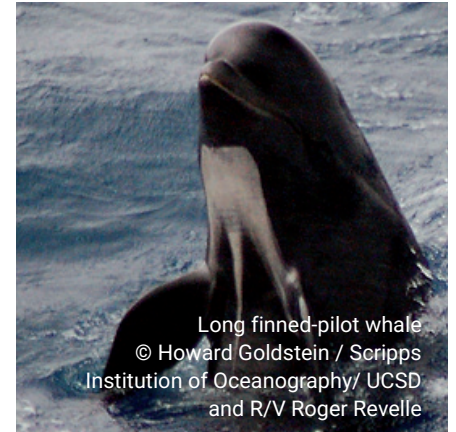
Pollution

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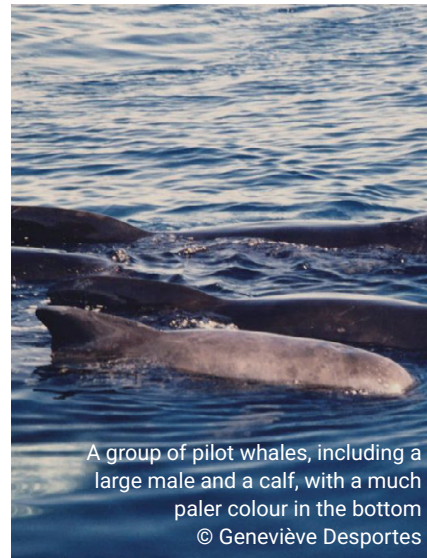


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Did you know there are two different species of pilot whale in the world? These are the long-finned and the short-finned pilot whales. In the northern part of the North Atlantic we only find the long-finned pilot whales. These prefer the colder waters, while short-finned pilot whales can be found in more tropical waters. Another difference is that long-finned pilot whales have longer **pectoral fins**, up to 20% of their body length, and a bigger **dorsal fin**.



Long finned-pilot whale
© Howard Goldstein / Scripps Institution of Oceanography/ UCSD and R/V Roger Revelle



A group of pilot whales, including a large male and a calf, with a much paler colour in the bottom © Geneviève Desportes

Pilot whales are very social, living in close-knit groups led by **matriarchs**, typically older females. Their strong social bonds lead to synchronised behaviours like breathing and diving, reinforcing their connections. They are not only social with each other, but are also often seen in the company of other dolphin and other whale **species**.

Pilot whales are unfortunately also known for mass **strandings**, when a large group strands together. While it is not clear why they do this, their strong social bonds may be a reason why when one whale gets stranded, others in the group follow.



Research: Pilot whales live in **matriarchal** pods, meaning their leaders are females. What other **species** live in **matriarchal** societies?