

MAMMALS SECTION

SPERM WHALE

ABOUT

The Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) is the largest odontocete (toothed) whale. Its head contains the largest brain of any creature known to have lived on earth. The head makes up one third of its total body length, and is blunt and square with a small under slung jaw. The Sperm Whale is usually a dark brownish gray in color with lighter streaks, spots, and scratches, with a lighter gray underside sometimes marked with white patches. The skin around the mouth is white. The whale's body appears wrinkled and shriveled, particularly behind the head. A single blowhole is located forward on the left side of the head, and the blow is projected forward rather than straight up as in other whales. The Sperm Whale has a squat dorsal fin and knuckles along its spine. Its flippers are small and slightly tapered while the tail lobes (flukes) are broad and can measure 16ft (5 m) from tip to tip. Adult males reach up to 59 ft (18 m) in length and can weigh 45 tons (40,800 kg). The females are much smaller at 36 ft (11 m), weighing a maximum of 14 tons (12,700 kg). Sperm Whales eat thousands of pounds of fish and squid a day and can dive as deep as 3,280ft (1,000 m). Males sexually mature at around 10 years, but do not appear to take part in breeding until their late twenties. Females are sexually mature between 7 and 13 years. The gestation period (pregnancy) is a long 14 to 16 months and the calves nurse for at least two years. Sperm Whales travel in groups (pods) of females and young, with the males visiting for only a few hours at a time. These groups usually have 10 to 20 members, and seem to communally care for the young.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sperm Whales are an endangered species, although they are still fairly numerous. However, selective killing of the larger breeding-age males over too many years upset the ratio of male to female, seriously decreasing the birth rate in some populations. They were also particularly hunted for the clear liquid oil (spermaceti) found in a large reservoir in the Sperm Whale's head that hardens to a wax like consistency when cold. They also produce a strange substance called ambergris, found in large lumps in their lower intestine formed around squid beaks that remain in the stomach. Ambergris was used in the manufacture of perfume, and continues to be valuable, even though it has mostly been replaced by synthetic material. The most recent estimates of Sperm Whale numbers stand at a global population of around 360,000 compared to numbers of over a million before whaling.

For more detailed information visit: www.acsonline.org or <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com>.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

What strange substance used in making perfume is found in the Sperm Whale's stomach?

- a) Spermaceti
- b) Ambergris
- c) Lanolin
- d) Wax

Answer is B.

