

More Information

Humpback whale interactions along the Ningaloo Coast

Background to the in-water humpback whale interaction industry

In 2016, a trial for swimming with humpback whales began in State waters of Ningaloo Marine Park and the Muiron Islands Marine Management Area. Under the trial, whale shark operators are permitted to run swimming with humpback whale tours along the Ningaloo Coast. The trial will continue until 2023 and will transition to a licensed industry by 2024, with licences being reallocated through a competitive process.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) has developed the Management program for humpback whale interactions along the Ningaloo Coast 2020. It identifies management objectives, desired outcomes and management actions for interactions with humpback whales, with a specific focus on in-water interactions.

How and when did swimming with humpback whales start in Western Australia?

On 1 November 2015 the Minister for Environment announced a trial program, commencing mid-2016, that allowed commercial whale shark tour operators to conduct in-water interactions with humpback whales in Ningaloo Marine Park (State waters) and Muiron Islands Marine Management Area. This has allowed participating licensed tour operators to take guests swimming with humpback whales in a controlled environment, if the conditions are assessed as acceptable for both for the whales and the swimmers. This trial is managed by DBCA.



Humpback whale breaching. Photo: Dani Rob.

Who can swim with humpback whales in Western Australia?

Under State legislation, it is not legal for individuals to swim within 100m of a whale, and if a whale approaches, any person in the water must attempt to maintain a distance of at least 100m. However, as part of the in-water humpback whale interaction trial Marine Park, 15 existing licensed whale shark operators were offered the opportunity to participate and conduct humpback whale swim tours. These operators were selected based on their experience in delivering in-water whale shark tours and their capability to assist in the management of the program through real time monitoring and data collection via an Electronic Monitoring System (EMS) already installed on their vessels. A seasonal tourism program based on swimming with whale sharks has existed in Ningaloo Marine Park for several decades and this program is recognised as world's best practice.

The in-water humpback whale interaction trial

For the trial, the (then) Department of Parks and Wildlife (now DBCA) developed management and licensing protocols in consultation with stakeholders, and a training program was delivered to provide guidance to the operators and their employees. Licences were issued under the Conservation and Land Management Act 1984. Research and monitoring have been conducted under the trial and the trial has been reviewed annually to consider the potential impacts of the activity on humpback whales as well as visitor safety.

The trial has been managed under four principles, to:

- minimise and manage impacts of humpback whales, particularly on mothers and calves;
- minimise and manage risks to swimmers engaging in in-water interactions;
- contribute to the establishment of a sustainable and viable industry; and
- ensure informed decision-making about the activity underpinned by research and monitoring.

Transition from a trial to a permanent licensed industry

On the basis that the trial had been successful over four seasons without evidence of negative impacts from in-water interactions on humpback whales nor significant risks to public safety and a high level of satisfaction from visitors, the State Government has determined to continue with the trial in 2020 with a view to transitioning to a licensed industry with a restricted number of licences.

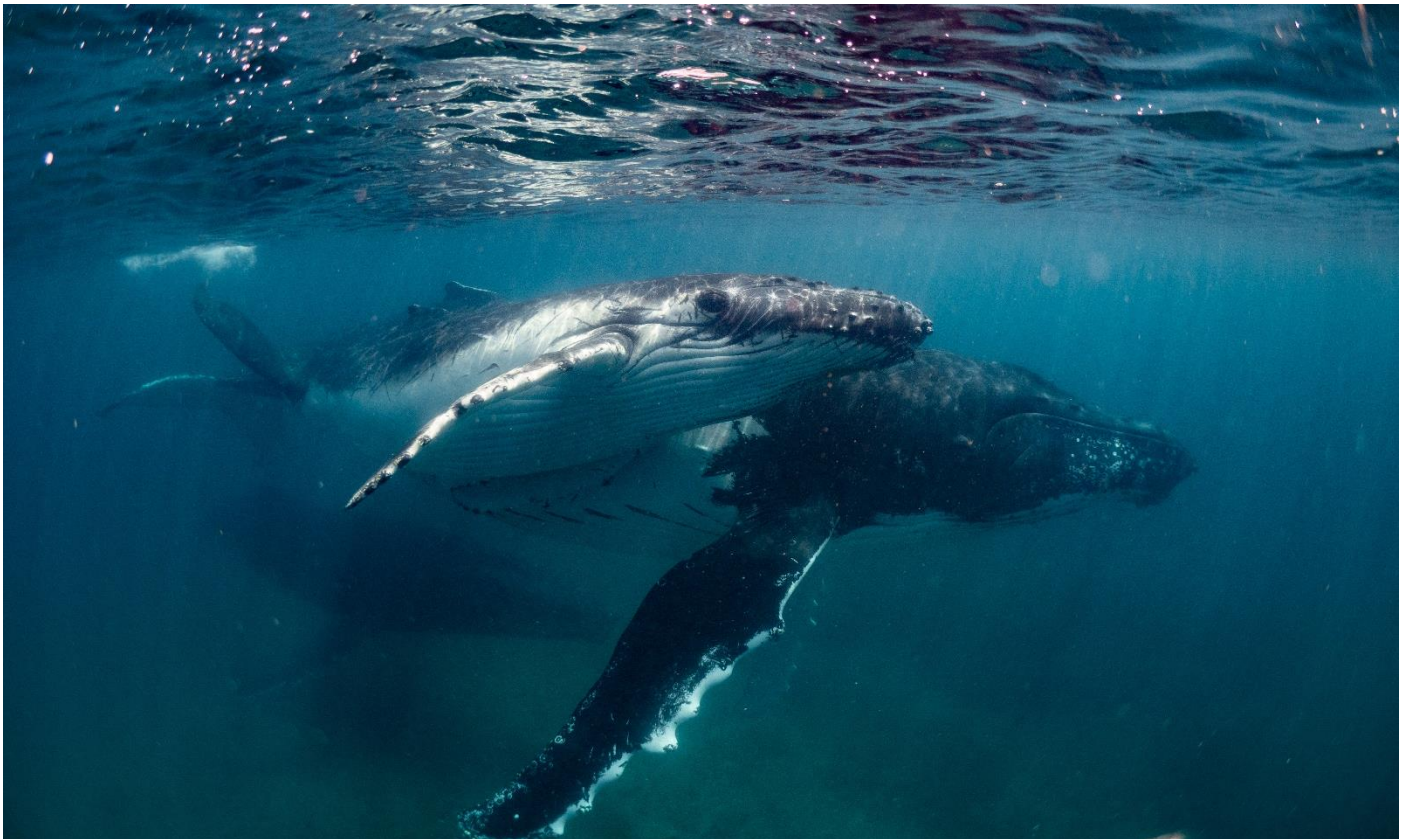
The trial will continue until 2023 and will transition to a licensed industry by 2024, with licences being reallocated through a competitive process.

Who will manage the licensed in-water humpback whale industry?

Both the in-water humpback whale interaction trial and the future licensed industry are managed by DBCA.

What is the management program?

To ensure the ongoing protection of humpback whales in the Ningaloo region, promote their conservation at a wider level, and inform the management of the in-water humpback whale interaction industry, DBCA has developed the Management program for humpback whale interactions along the Ningaloo Coast 2020. The management program focuses on in-water interactions with humpback whales in Ningaloo Marine Park (State waters) and Muiron Islands Marine Management Area, but also addresses recreational activities, whale watching and other operations, and will provide the framework for the allocation and management of licences for in-water interactions into the future.



Swimming with humpback whales on Ningaloo Reef. Photo: Jessica Strickland.

What consultation was involved in the management program?

DBCA has drawn on experience and knowledge from operators and scientists and has coordinated with the Gnulli joint management partners through the Nyinggulu (Ningaloo) Coast Joint Management Body in the drafting of the management program. The draft program was released for a one-month public comment period in January 2020, with input considered and incorporated into the final management program.

Will swimming with humpback whales be permitted elsewhere?

Currently, the State waters of Ningaloo Marine Park and Muiron Islands Marine Management Area is the only area where licensed in-water humpback whale interactions are permitted in Western Australia. The Commonwealth Government has not issued licences for swimming with humpback whales in Commonwealth waters.

I have more questions. Who can I contact?

Do you have a question that has not been answered? Feel free to get in touch with the DBCA Humpback Whale Project Officer, by emailing exmouth@dbca.wa.gov.au, or contact::

Exmouth District

Parks and Wildlife Service
Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions
20 Nimitz Street
Exmouth WA 6707