42

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Orcinus orca (Linnaeus, 1758) - New Zealand, Whangarei

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Orcinus orca (Linnaeus, 1758) (Mammalia, Cetacea). Orca are currently considered mono-specific, although increasing numbers of ecotypes are now recognised. These ecotypes are genetically, acoustically, morphologically and ecologically distinct and exhibit unique cultures. As a species-complex they are considered "data deficient" by the IUCN, however some populations are well studied and a number are listed as threatened or endangered. Orca are largest of the Delphinidae and are very social but with stable networks, creating in some instances the most static social networks of any animal species (covering decades of stable associations between individuals). Longevity is approximately 70 years for males and 100 years for females. The species has striking pigmentation with white post-ocular patches, a white venter with flank patches and white under flukes. The upper body colouring is either black or grey, depending on the ecotype. Most individuals have a grey "saddle-patch" posterior to the dorsal fin, which is variable in shape, size and pigmentation density. Considered one of the most widely distributed cetaceans, they are found in all major oceans and from the poles to the tropics. Although orca have been documented taking over 200 species of prey, most ecotypes are highly specialised foragers and may focus on only a dozen (or less) prey species using specific hunting methods.

Ingrid N. Visser. Orca Research Trust, Tutukaka, Northland New Zealand; email: orca@orca.org (photos I.N. Visser, New Zealand); cover: adult female; above: Antarctic Type B ecotype showing grey body pigmentation, dorsal cape, grey saddle-patch and white eye-patch; center; New Zealand Coastal ecotype showing black body pigmentation, white venter, flanks and eye-patch and grey saddle-patch; below: an adult male (right) with his presumed mother, illustrating the sexually dimorphic (larger) dorsal fin.