



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*)

Description

Killer whales are the largest delphinid. They have a strikingly black and white color pattern, with black sides and back, a white ventral surface, and oval white patches slightly above and behind the eyes. Their heads are conical and lack the well defined beak characteristic of other odontocetes. Their dorsal fin is large, prominent, and variable in shape, with males having a much larger dorsal fin than females. Killer whales are highly social and are found in relatively stable matrilineal groups of 2 to 15 individuals.

Habitat and Distribution

Killer whales are the most widely distributed cetacean. They occur in especially large numbers at high latitudes with an abundance of prey.

Sounds

Killer whales produce a variety of sounds for navigation, feeding, and socializing. They produce echolocation clicks to locate prey, but also use these sounds during social interactions. Other social sounds include whistles and pulsed calls that resemble squeaks, screams, and squawks.

Feeding

Killer whales eat a varied diet including small schooling fish, squid, baleen whales, sperm whales, salmon, tuna, pinnipeds, sea turtles, otters, sirenians, and even deer or moose! Populations tend to specialize on particular types of prey.

Threats

Current threats include contaminants such as PCBs, depletion of prey from overfishing, ship strike, oil spills, acoustic disturbance, and entanglement.

Fun Fact

Different groups of killer whales produce specific vocalization types known as “dialects”!



Family: Delphinidae
Population: <50,000
Status: Data Deficient
Length: 26 – 30 feet
Weight: Up to 6 tons