

A Whale of a Time in Oz!

In search of the Southern Right Whale 'down under'

Helen Highwater

Southern Right Whale, Nullarbor Plain South Australia

Getting there wasn't easy. First there was a 500 kilometre flight from Adelaide on a tiny plane shaped like a toothpaste tube. Then once we'd landed we met up with Gary White, our expedition leader, and his jeep. 200 kilometres along the Eyre Highway we entered the treeless Nullarbor Plain, a semi-desert populated mainly by Aboriginal people.

Our destination was the head of the Great Australian Bight, where we were to spend two days watching whales. On the way Gary told us what we wanted to know:

'Sadly, over 25,000 whales had been killed before whaling ceased in 1930. By this time Southern Right Whales were virtually extinct. They were known as "Right" whales because they were right for hunting in small land-based boats. They came close inshore, floated when killed, and had thick blubber, which produced the valuable whale oil when it was boiled down. This meant that the poor whales were hunted down in vast numbers by money-making shipowners.'

'Right Whales feed on small creatures at or near the surface, gently swimming along with their mouths half open, allowing the sea water to flow in. The water is pushed back out with their tongues, leaving the food behind. Thankfully, they are now a protected species and numbers have risen to nearly 800.'

This was a dismal tale but it had a happy ending – the whales were now safe from murderous whale hunters.

Two hours before sunset we arrived at our destination. The crumbling limestone cliffs dropped sheer into the deep blue of the bay. It was August, the height of the whales' breeding season. Every three years the whales come from their home waters in the Antarctic to their Australian breeding grounds. Mature females weigh 80 tonnes. The females do not eat at all until they return to the Antarctic. By this time they will have lost 20 tonnes in weight.

As the sun began to set behind us we looked out, but saw... nothing. Then boom! Right in front of us the sea erupted as a huge whale burst from the surface, thrusting its body out of the water and smashing down with a noise like a cannon firing. Again and again it surged from the sea, a majestic and thrilling sight.

After a meal under the stars we talked some more. Gary told us that large numbers of female whales and their



calves had been in the bay the previous week. The calves are six metre long at birth and they grow to three times that length.

'This was Nature at its finest, awesome and strangely moving.'

Our final day began early. We packed up our camp, walked to the cliff edge and were amazed! I counted 24 whales. Swimming parallel to the shore, very close in, was a long procession of mothers and their calves. They floated past on the surface. Some swam side by side, others lazily rolled over each other as they moved slowly along. They were enormous. As they expelled the air from their blow-holes, great spouts of misty waters shot upwards. This was Nature at its finest, awesome and strangely moving. We were silent watchers of a primeval, wonderful sight. How can people hunt such beautiful and truly amazing creatures?

All too soon we had to go. In October the whales would return home too, home to the Antarctic. We said little. We'd been stunned by the size of Australia, climbed Ayers Rock and followed the tourist trail. These would become distant memories, but our two days whale-watching would remain alive in our hearts for ever.

TASKS

1. Read the passage carefully then make bullet-pointed notes under these headings:
 - a. *The behaviour of Southern Right Whales*
 - b. *Why Southern Right Whales are suitable for hunting*
 - c. *What the writer felt about her experience of visiting Australia and of watching the whales*