

Better protecting whales in South Australia

The science

Southern right whales are listed as endangered and a migratory threatened species under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)*. Numbers in Australia are estimated at 2,800 – less than 20% of pre-whaling abundance.

Southern right whales visit Australian coastlines between May and October to give birth, nurse their young, mate, rest and socialise.

Australia recognises 2 sub-populations of southern right whales in the south-east and south-west of Australia, each with different recovery rates. In recent years, population growth has slowed and calving cycles have extended, prompting concerns for species recovery.

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abundance.

Biologically Important Areas (BIAs) are designated for marine species protected under the EPBC Act. BIAs for reproduction in SA include nursery areas at the Head of the Great Australian Bight (HOB), Fowlers Bay and Encounter Bay. Sleaford Bay is currently being considered as a new reproductive area.

Nursery areas in South Australia

Head of Bight

Far West Coast Marine Park and Commonwealth Great Australian Bight Marine Park

- Records more female calf pairs (mother whales and their calves) in the annual count than anywhere else in the entire south-western group.
- A seasonal exclusion zone is in place that excludes all access at Head of the Bight from 1 May - 31 October.



Fowlers Bay

Nuyts Archipelago Marine Park

- A small reproductive area and historical whaling site.
- There has been a rapid increase in the number of whales found at this site – highlighting the expanding distribution of southern right whales across SA's coastline.



Encounter Bay

Encounter Marine Park

- A historically important area prior to whaling. Whales at this site were heavily exploited by 2 shore based whaling stations.
- There has been a slow return of whales to this site. Individuals from the south-east and west subpopulation have been recorded here. The site is potentially an important area for linking the 2 subpopulations.

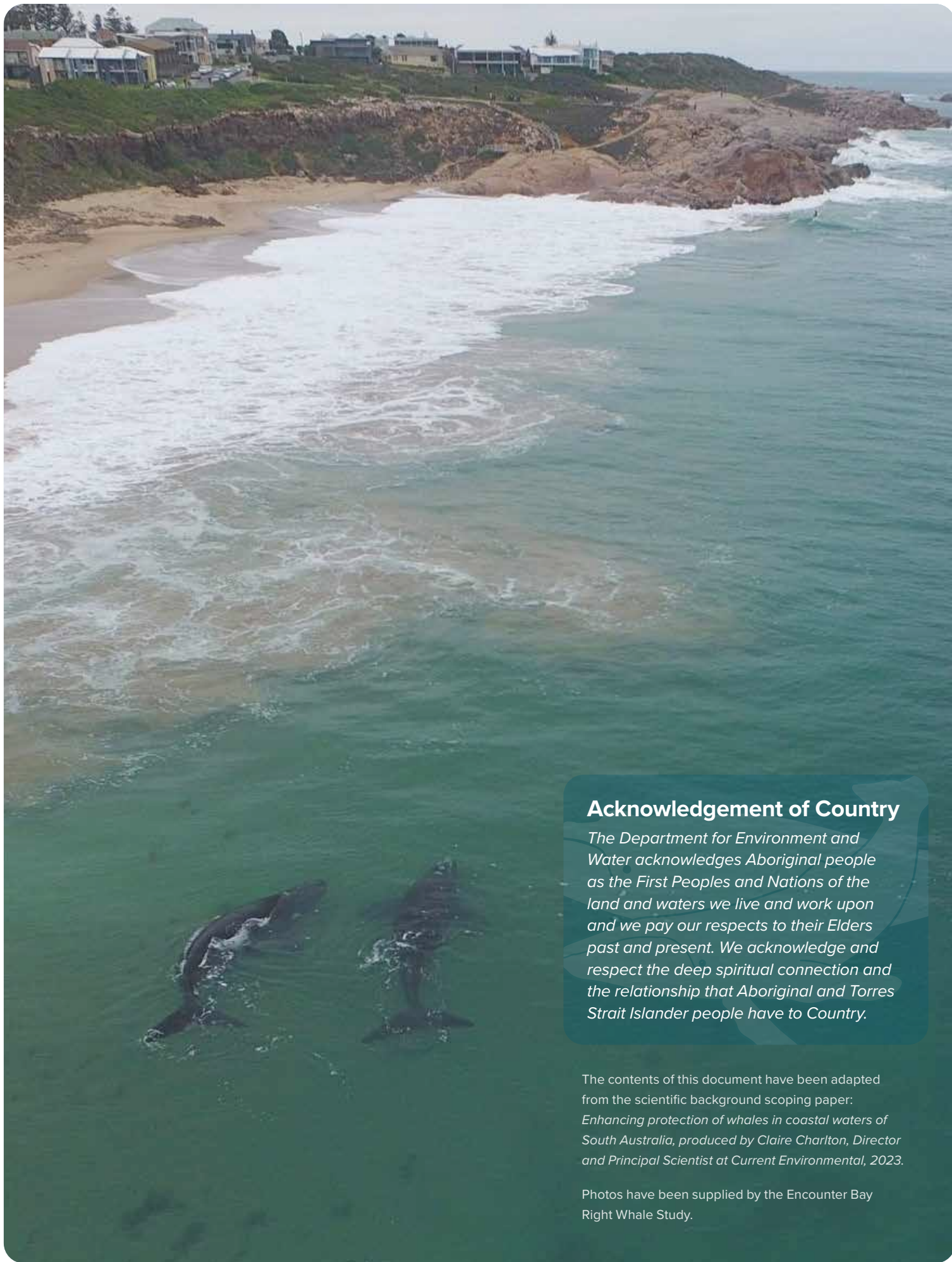


Sleaford Bay

Thorny Passage Marine Park

- Historically subject to high levels of whaling. Data collected by citizen scientists indicates that this site is significant for reproduction, having been consistently used by female calf pairs over recent years.





Acknowledgement of Country

The Department for Environment and Water acknowledges Aboriginal people as the First Peoples and Nations of the land and waters we live and work upon and we pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge and respect the deep spiritual connection and the relationship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to Country.

The contents of this document have been adapted from the scientific background scoping paper: *Enhancing protection of whales in coastal waters of South Australia*, produced by Claire Charlton, Director and Principal Scientist at Current Environmental, 2023.

Photos have been supplied by the Encounter Bay Right Whale Study.

Threats

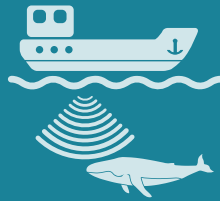
While visiting Australia's coastal waters, southern right whales are often found in shallow areas, spending much of their time near the surface. Threats, including those that come from human activities, can significantly affect them – especially during crucial life stages like giving birth.

They face multiple threats, including:

Habitat disruption



Noise interference



Entanglement



Coastal development



Vessel strike



Prey depletion



Climate change



These threats have the potential to lead to stress, behavioural disturbance, injury, and death.

Characteristics such as their long-life span, low reproductive output, vulnerable calf stage, late sexual maturity and strong site fidelity make them prone to prolonged responses to disturbances that are challenging to detect within a short period (1 - 3 years).

Enhancing the protection of southern right whales in nearshore reproductive areas and along migratory pathways is pivotal for mitigating disturbances that leave the population vulnerable.

Nursery Protection Areas

Enhanced protection in reproductive areas and migratory corridors is crucial for the coexistence of whales and humans. This is particularly important given the increase in marine based industries and overlap in threats within important nursery areas.

Increased protection could include total exclusion zones, seasonal vessel exclusion zones, vessel speed restrictions, increased approach distances, whale watching restrictions, reducing fishing impacts and codes of conduct for all water users.

Increasing legislative protection in SA coastal waters has significant potential benefits. Measures would enhance economic value of ecotourism by safeguarding whales and their calves, providing public engagement and tourism opportunities. Actions taken to protect southern right whales also contribute to the overall health and balance of the marine ecosystem.

