



Breaching east-coast humpback whale.
Photo: Dan Burns

The recovery of the east and west coast Australian populations of humpback whales is an example of what can be achieved with community advocacy for a threatened species and international collaboration.

Near-catastrophic decline

Globally, extensive and unsustainable whaling programs in the 19th and 20th centuries depleted humpback whales to critically low levels. The catastrophic decline in their numbers led to the collapse of the Australian and New Zealand coastal commercial whaling operations.

Although the nature of the threat to the species was clear, it took many decades to control the threat because the industry was poorly regulated and much of it operated in the open ocean beyond territorial boundaries.

Protection

In Australia, exploitation ceased because whale numbers were driven to very low levels and because of changing public and political attitudes to whales and dolphins. People began to value these intelligent mammals more highly for their exceptional and complex cognition and behaviours than for their commercial value. The realisation that extinction due to human action was otherwise imminent galvanised the conservation movement, leading to direct action anti-whaling campaigns, such as that by Greenpeace in Albany in 1977.

An independent inquiry by the Australian Government into humpback whaling led to the landmark outcome of the *Whale Protection Act 1980*. By 1986, the International Whaling Commission introduced an international moratorium on the take of humpback whales. It still stands today.

Recovery success

Long-term monitoring of humpback whales has shown remarkable recovery following the control of the principal threat.

International collaboration has been essential. The extensive migratory dispersal of humpback whales within, across and beyond national borders means their conservation depends on international policies and agreements.

The future

Ironically, success in reversing the fortune of the humpback whale may lead to calls for whaling to resume. Recovery cannot be assumed to be secured. Other potential threats include depletion of krill through fishing, the impacts of global climate change and increased incidence of collisions through higher shipping traffic.

Abundance is close to natural population sizes before the onset of whaling exploitation, and may exceed original sizes if current recovery continues. Long-lasting international action by governments, and community attitudes, also provide grounds for hope that future populations can be effectively managed, unless full commercial whaling resumes.

More information

Peter L. Harrison and John C. Z. Woinarski (2018) Recovery of Australian subpopulations of humpback whale. In *Recovering Australian Threatened Species: A Book of Hope*. (Eds S Garnett, P Latch, D Lindenmayer, J Woinarski) pp 5-12. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.