

Vast group of southern fin whales filmed feeding in Antarctica, sparking hope of recovery

Scientists say numbers of world's second-largest animal have slowly improved since 1970s whaling ban but sightings in Antarctic feeding grounds are rare



Fin whales in the 'thrilling' Antarctic spectacle. Photograph: Helena Herr/University of Hamburg/

Agence France-Presse

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For the first time since whaling was banned, up to 150 southern fin whales have been filmed feeding together in a “thrilling” Antarctic spectacle, hailed by scientists as a sign of hope for the world’s second-biggest animal.

The ocean giants are second only to blue whales in length, with slender bodies that help them glide through the water at high speed.

They could not evade industrial whaling, however, and were slaughtered to near-extinction during the 20th century as hunters systematically shattered populations of whales across the planet.



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“They were reduced to 1 or 2% of their original population size,” said Helena Herr, of the University of Hamburg, lead author of the research, published in the journal *Scientific Reports*. “We’re talking about a couple of thousand animals left for the whole southern hemisphere area.”

While scientists say numbers of southern fin whales have been slowly recovering since a 1976 whaling ban, there have been few sightings of these mysterious animals in large groups at their historic feeding grounds.

But in scenes that Herr described as “one of nature’s greatest events”, researchers and filmmakers were able to capture footage of up to 150 southern fin whales in [Antarctica](#).

Drone footage, shot by wildlife filmmakers from the BBC, shows the fin whales swooping and lunging through the water, blasting great bursts of air as they surface, as birds wheel in the sky above them.

“The water around us was boiling, because the animals were coming up all the time,” Herr said on Thursday. “It was thrilling, just standing there and watching it.”

In two expeditions in 2018 and 2019, researchers recorded 100 groups of fin whales, ranging from small gatherings of a few individuals to eight huge congregations of up to 150 animals.

Previously, recorded feeding groups had a maximum of around a dozen whales.

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Using data from their surveys, the authors estimate that there could be almost 8,000 fin whales in the Antarctic area.

Fin whales can live to around 70 or 80 years old when left alone and have just one calf at a time, so Herr said the recovery of populations was a slow process.

She said increasing numbers of southern fin whales were an encouraging sign that conservation measures could work, although she noted other threats, including being struck by boats.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature now lists fin whales as “vulnerable” and estimates the global population as 100,000, with most of these in the northern hemisphere.

More whales could also be a good sign for the health of the ocean more generally – and even efforts to tackle climate change.

Whales feed on iron-rich krill but they also defecate in the surface waters – returning nutrients to the ocean that help spark the growth of tiny phytoplankton, the foundation of the marine food web. Like plants on land, phytoplankton photosynthesise using the sun’s rays to turn carbon dioxide into energy and oxygen.

They were “ecosystem engineers”, said Herr, who first spotted a large group of the whales by chance in 2013 during a research mission into Antarctic minke whales.

She now plans more missions to investigate the enduring mystery of these ocean giants – where they breed. “We don’t know where they go,” said Herr, adding that much more was known about the fin whales of the northern hemisphere.



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The animals can grow up to around 27m (88 feet), although Herr said they now tended to average 22m, particularly after whaling that targeted the biggest creatures.

In all some 700,000 individual fin whales were killed during the 20th century for the oil in their body fat.