

'UNDERSEA EYE' UPDATE FOR MINKE WHALE ENCOUNTER
Minke 1: JN107 June 2-8, 2007

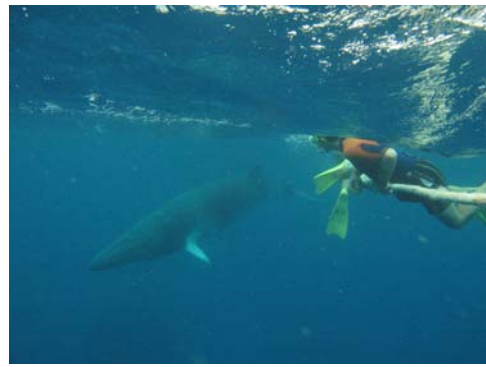


The Undersea Explorer crew was extremely excited this week by the beginning of the minke whale season! There have been several sightings of dwarf minke whales reported by day boat operators over the last several weeks, but this is the first week of the year that Undersea dedicates to whale watching along the Great Barrier Reef (GBR). For the next seven weeks, the boat will remain inside the Ribbon Reefs, and will not make excursions out to the Coral Sea. Minkes are most often spotted within the Ribbon Reefs at this time of year, so staying on the GBR greatly increases the likelihood of having in-water minke



Whale lookout point

whale encounters. This week, minke whale researchers Susan Sobotzick and Arnold Mangott from James Cook University were on board. Susan and Arnold spend from sunup to sundown on the top deck of the vessel (unless they are in the water), watching for whales. If they, or any crew members or guests spot from a distance the characteristic shape of a dorsal fin cutting through the water as the animal breathes, the cry is immediately raised. "Minke! Minke!" The call echoes through the wheelhouse, and skipper Neil Pacey slows the engines to idle. Everyone on deck rushes to the rail, watching eagerly for the next sighting. "There they are, coming this way!" As the animals approach, lines are thrown into the water from the bow and stern. The guests hurriedly don wetsuits and snorkel gear and make their way to one of six deflated inner tubes hanging from each line. Placing the inner tube around the waist leaves two hands free for taking photos of the magnificent spectacle. And what a spectacle it is! In the distance, a dark shadow...is it a whale? The white shoulder patch



Whale watching on the line from above...and below

comes into focus first, and you soon realize you are staring into the eyes of an approaching dwarf minke whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. You involuntarily hold your breath as the animal glides towards you, seemingly without effort. It passes beneath you, and as you turn to watch it go, you can see three more heading your way. This is just the beginning of the minke ballet, and if you're lucky, you might spend up to several hours drifting with multiple different whales. From the data collected during last year's season, the average in-water encounter length was nearly two hours! This week, guests were treated to four separate in-water encounters. One lasted 5 ½ hours, with 8 individual whales spotted.



Even more excitingly, one of the whales seen was ZigZag, so named for the jagged boundary between his white stomach and grey upper body. He was sighted in 2006, but his sex remained a mystery. This year, thanks to footage taken by guest Derek Van Randerat, Susan was able to spot the characteristic three marks along his underbelly; the belly button, the genital slit, and the anus. In females, the genital slit and anus are so close as to be virtually indistinguishable under water. They also have a mammary slit on each side. ZigZag is an extremely important sighting, as it marks only the second time that a male oceanic rorqual whale has been re-sighted on its wintering ground in subsequent years, anywhere in the world! Oceanic rorqual whales include the Brydes, Sei, Blue, Fin, and Minke whales. Congratulations to the Minke Whale Project for this exciting find!

Creature Feature: Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*)



This week spinner dolphins were sighted multiple times, playing in the bow wake of the Undersea Explorer, or leaping out of the water and spinning several times mid-air. There are many possible explanations for this behaviour, including getting rid of parasites, as a courtship display, or simply just for fun!

Environmental Tip of the Week: Eat local food!

With local food you'll get exceptional taste and freshness, strengthen your local economy, support endangered family farms, safeguard your family's health, and protect the environment. (www.tipthepplanet.com)



*In the end we conserve only what we love,
We love only what we understand,
And we understand only what we are taught.
- Baba Dioum, 1965*

