

# Minke Whales

## RESEARCH UPDATE 21 SEPTEMBER 1999

Following a very successful 1999 minke whale season in which a record number of sightings occurred, researchers involved in the Minke Whale Project are now collecting passenger questionnaires and sighting sheets, interviewing industry members and analysing the massive amounts of data collected this winter. Over the five weeks of the core minke whale season, the research team had over 40 encounters with a total of approximately 200 whales. Around half of these provided good identification data and many were subsequently re-sighted, some on several occasions.

Whilst much remains unknown about these mysterious creatures, the increasing number of sightings and photographs of the whales made by the research team and Cairns section live-aboard dive operators have contributed significantly to our understanding of their distribution and local abundance. The identification of individual whales has been central to this effort. The identification technique, developed by Peter Arnold and Alastair Birtles, uses the natural markings on a whale's body and its scar patterns as a unique "fingerprint". The biological and behavioural study of the whales is a major component of the Minke Whale Project. However, as growing numbers of people are experiencing in-water encounters with these whales, the Project has also focussed on testing and implementing solutions to existing and potential threats to the whales and the industry.

Since 1996, Alastair Birtles and Peter Valentine have been researching tourists' experiences with the whales, in order to understand experiential and operational issues involved in ensuring a sustainably managed human-wildlife interaction. Results from data collected since 1996 have consistently shown how powerful the effects of encounters with minke whales are on tourists' experiences. The scuba diver survey results from 1996 to 1998, and the work of Fleur O'Neill, Yoshie Matsukura (Master of Tourism graduates) and Matt Curnock (Tourism Honours graduate) have highlighted the importance of understanding people's experiences as a precursor to best practice management of human-minke whale interactions. They have also indicated the importance of people being well informed about minke whales and adequately prepared for their encounter.

Outcomes of the Project so far have included the development of a Minke Whale Information Package (MWIP99), the establishment of an industry sightings network, and a Code of Practice for swimming with the whales. During the 1999 season, the new, in-depth passenger questionnaires (MWQ99) were distributed by live-aboard dive tourism operators encountering the whales.

The results of these questionnaires will be used to help assess the effectiveness of the Code of Practice as well as to improve the interpretation available to future passengers. An expected outcome of this study includes a revised information package for industry use during the year 2000 season. A portable digital picture identification catalogue

(PODPIC) CD-ROM is also being developed for recognising and identifying individual whales.

Currently, experienced dive industry members are being interviewed to help better understand operational procedures, and to ensure industry input into future management of the industry. The ultimate goal of this aspect of the Minke Whale Project is that the industry will be able to provide consistently high quality experiences for tourists, whilst ensuring the sustainability of its valuable and unique resource.

We would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank all participating Cairns section live-aboard dive operators, their crew and staff members, whose contributions to the Project have assisted its many discoveries and successes. We hope that further outcomes of the Project continue to be of use to the industry and lead to the long-term sustainability of human-dwarf minke whale interactions.

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