

Feresa attenuata (Pygmy Killer Whale)

Family: Delphinidae (Oceanic Dolphins and Killer Whales)

Order: Cetacea (Whales and Dolphins)

Class: Mammalia (Mammals)



Fig. 1. Pygmy killer whale, *Feresa attenuata*.

[<http://www.arkive.org/pygmy-killer-whale/feresa-attenuata/image-G37599.html>, downloaded 11 September 2016]

TRAITS. The pygmy killer whale is in actuality a large dolphin. It usually grows to a length of 2.1-6m and weighs 110-170kg. It possesses a set of 22 teeth in the top jaw, and 26 in the lower jaw; approximately 48 teeth in total, all conical in structure (Marinebio.org, 2016). The pygmy killer whale's head is rounded and it lacks the long, protruding beak that is common to most dolphin species. It possesses a pair of long, rounded flippers and the dorsal fin is relatively large and in the middle of the back (NOAA Fisheries, 2016). It is dark grey in colour, with lighter sides and a narrow, black dorsal cape that is a distinguishing feature. The end of the snout is distinctively white, and the genital area on the underside of the body has an irregular pattern of pink or white skin. Some individuals may be seen with scars and scratches on their bodies that are usually white in colour (Marinebio.org, 2016).

ECOLOGY. These mammals are largely found in deep, tropical waters worldwide (Fig. 2) (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1971). They have also been sighted, to a lesser extent, in warm temperate regions. They are found in warm waters at least 500m deep, hence they are very rarely seen near the shore. One reason why they prefer deep water is the fact that most of their prey can be found there. The pygmy killer whales' diet consists mainly of cephalopods such as squid and octopus, and fish. Pygmy killer whales are quite rare, and IUCN has classified these animals "data deficient"

in its most recent account in 2007 (WDC, 2016). They usually travel quite slowly, with speeds of approximately 3km per hour, but they can reach much higher speeds of up to 30km per hour. They are said to be of an aggressive nature, and hence they are not known to possess many enemies; they are however vulnerable to the bigger sharks and killer whales.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. They exhibit very strong and stable social bonds. This is demonstrated in their habit of mass stranding, where they do not abandon their sick or immobile kin, but remain until he or she succumbs. They also show site fidelity, that is, a school of pygmy killer whales tends to return to the same area to mate each time. They frequently travel in schools (Fig. 3) of at least 10, and up to 100 individuals or more. In many cases, both males and females may remain in their birth groups. These groups sometimes swim in perfectly coordinated patterns. When alarmed, they cluster together and quickly swim away from the threat. Due to their rarity, there is minimal information regarding the mating patterns of the pygmy killer whale. However, the males are said to be sexually mature upon reaching a length greater than 2.2m, while the females are said to be mature at a length greater than 2.6m (Marinebio.org, 2016). The calf is usually around 0.8m.

COMMUNICATION. Pygmy Killer whales tend to spy hop, breach and bow ride in waves (sometimes produced by boats). They can be seen resting near the surface of the water. They have also been observed leaping and splashing with their entire bodies out of the water and sometimes swim with their heads protruding from the surface. They emit high pitched sounds that allow them to carry out echolocation in order to locate objects, and as a means of communication. They can reach frequencies of 70-85kHz, and 8-20 clicks per second (NOAA Fisheries, 2016). It has been recorded that they also make noises akin to growling, which can be heard even at the water surface. Weather disturbances may influence the behaviour of these animals. A group of pygmy killer whales stranded in the British Virgin Islands on the day before a hurricane (Mignucci-Giannoni et al., 2000).

REFERENCES

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Posted online: 2016

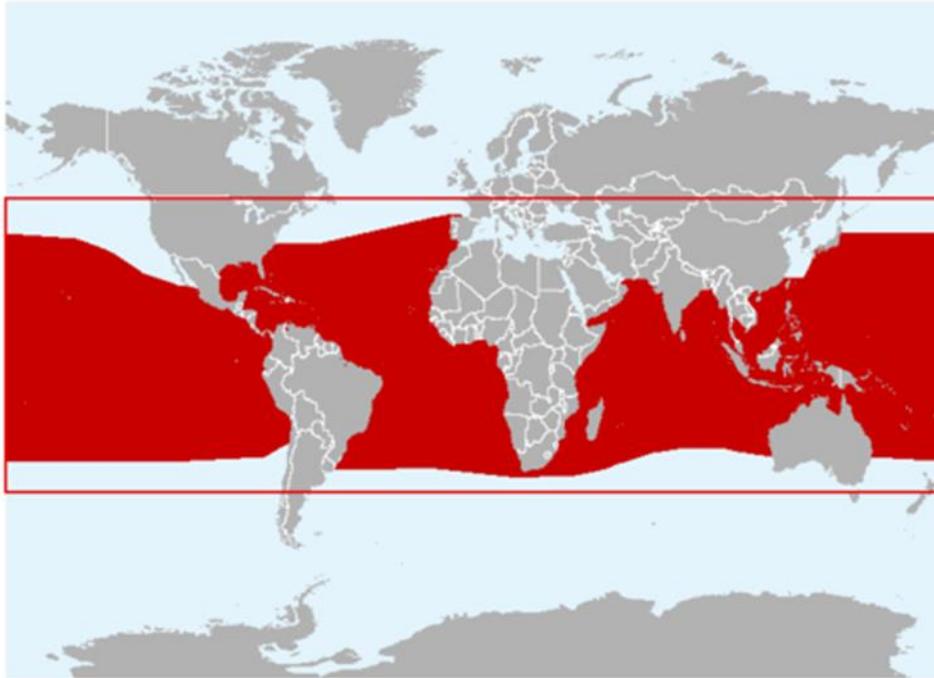


Fig. 2. Map showing the distribution of *Feresa attenuata*.

[<http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2008.RLTS.T8551A12921135.en>., downloaded 9 October 2016]



Fig. 3. Pygmy killer whales, *Feresa attenuata*, swimming in a small school.

[<http://www.arkive.org/pygmy-killer-whale/feresa-attenuata/image-G37599.html>, downloaded 9 October 2016]