



Further concerns over industry on the Kimberley coast.

With the release of the Browse LNG Strategic Assessment Report into the proposed industrial precinct on the Kimberley coast, Kimberley Whale Watching has again expressed fears for migratory Humpback whales.

Dec. 13, 2010 - [PRLog](#) -- Following the release of the "Part 10 Draft Strategic Assessment Relating to the Assessment of the Impacts of Actions under the Plan for the Browse Basin Common User Liquefied Natural Gas Hub Precinct and Associated Activities", Kimberley Whale Watching is concerned about the proposal to build an industrial precinct at James Price Point because of the serious impact on Kimberley cetaceans, in particular Humpback Whales. There is a need for extreme caution at this point, with the EPA itself acknowledging that there are significant deficiencies in the report with the following areas 'incomplete' and not included: Marine waste discharge; Oil spill modelling; Marine primary producer habitat, and Coastal processes.

Official 2008 population estimates place the Breeding Stock D (West coast of Australia) population at $22,000 \pm 8,000$ (i.e a range of 14,000 - 30,000). A revision by marine mammal scientists is due to be released soon, with a revised figure (John Bannister - pers.comm) placing the population somewhere near 34,000, with a range of $\pm 15,000$.

In Kimberley Whale Watching's 2008 whale survey results, we observed calving rates of nearly 10% over the course of the season, however in 2010, the average calving rate had dropped to just over 5%.

Figures released by Dr Nick Gales and Douglas Coughran in a paper to the IWC in June 2010 reported 46 humpback whale deaths along the WA coast in 2009 (an 'Unusual Mortality Event'), with the majority of these occurring in the lower part of the mid-west of the state, after the whales had passed by the heavy industrial shipping channels of the Pilbara, and following the Montara oil spill in August. Gales and Coughran concluded that the majority of the deaths were calves and juvenile humpbacks. It would appear from the paper that the number of deaths in 2010 was much lower, however the paper was presented to the IWC in June, at the beginning of the northern migration of the humpbacks, reflecting only 6 months of data, and is particularly significant in that the majority of calves are born in the second half of the year.

It should be noted that there were approximately 1,860 shipping movements out of Port Hedland in 2010 with a projected increase to 7,000 per annum in 2014. The estimated shipping movements from the hub site at James Price Point would be approximately 2,700 p.a, ie. nearly 1.5 times the shipping movements currently out of Port Hedland. The acoustic interference from industrial shipping at this level will be of significant consequence to the whales and other cetaceans, and will almost certainly have a detrimental affect on their wellbeing and ability to maintain communication. Humpback whales make over 640 different vocalizations, which are vital to their communications in turbid waters. The ability to communicate is particularly important between cows and their young and vulnerable calves.

Kimberley Whale Watching's 2009 and 2010 Kimberley Whales Surveys do not support Woodside's assertion that fewer than 5% of the whales travel within state waters in the area around James Price Point. Appendix C-8 of the submission states that "the majority follow the coastline closely between Broome and

Pender Bay." (page 9 appendix C-8). The report also states that a "range of key life activities including resting and nursing" were observed in the James Price Point area, but were not unique to the area. What is significant in this claim is that the whales WERE observed to be nursing in the area.

Another point of note is that the report acknowledges that "the relative importance of the specific habitat characteristics in the Kimberley for humpback whales is uncertain" (page 27 C-8). There are also anecdotal reports of humpbacks feeding in the vicinity, an area which is well known to local fishermen for its abundance of bait fish and sail fish. A local fishermen's saying is "where there are whales, there are sails".

The report states on page 27 that "Humpback whales do not depend on food resources along the migration route and therefor are freed from the habitat requirements of their prey food items", however observations over the past five years have led us to believe that the whales are in fact feeding in Kimberley waters on small bait fish and perhaps even euphausiids. We would suggest that if this is in fact the case, habitat is likely to be critical to the whales, and the EPA concluded that the report is deficient in the terms of the study of primary productivity in the area. Page 99 of the report states that there was an instance of apparent feeding behaviour (lunging with mouths open) offshore from James Price Point that was unconfirmed.

Kimberley Whale Watching observed the same behaviour just offshore of Barred Creek on the 19th of July 2009. A young calf was also observed exhibiting feeding behaviour off Willie Creek in August 2009 (see photographs in Kimberley Whale Watching's 2009 Cetacean Report, p.26).

During the 2010 peak migration period, from the 16-23 August, the highest concentration of whales recorded by Kimberley Whale Watching was between Adele Island and the Lacepede Islands, with 18 whales per hour of sighting effort, followed by The Lacepede Islands to Broome, with 15 whales per hour of sighting effort. This was significantly higher than Camden Sound. The report also states that calf thermoregulation is likely to be an important driver in the northern migration. Of significance this year was the difference in our observations of sea surface temperature between Camden Sound (28 degrees) and the Broome/James Price Point area (22 degrees), with fewer calves observed in Camden Sound this year than in previous years. It may be that there is an optimum sea surface temperature which is comfortable for newborn whales.

In 2001 Bannister and Hedley reassessed the pre-whaling population of BSD at 21,000, but the most recent estimate by the IWC Scientific Committee has it in the range of ca 16,000-30,000, a definite figure, or range, which is yet to be ratified by their scientific committee. As there is a dramatic variation in the range of the current estimate, the population, if taken at the lower end of the scale, may still not have reached the pre-whaling estimate and population carrying capacity.

The marine environment from 80 Mile Beach to the Lacepede Islands in both state and federal waters should be regarded as critical habitat for the Breeding Stock D population of Humpbacks as this is an important breeding, resting and feeding area for the whales, and should be protected as a Marine Protected Area. Both the federal and state governments should not downgrade the status of Humpbacks as a threatened species, and should regard the area as a special whale conservation area with similar protection to that proposed for the Camden Sound Marine Park.

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Kimberley Whale Watching conducts research and charters between Broome and Camden Sound on Western Australia's Kimberley coast.

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