

## **Whale Watching**

Whales are inseparably linked to the history and culture of the Ogasawara Islands. In 1830, the first settlers to the island arrived with the hope of doing business with whaling ships. Japanese people began whaling from the islands in 1863. In 1988, commercial whaling in Japan officially ended, but in the same year Ogasawara became the first place in the country to offer whale-watching tours.

Humpback and sperm whales are the most common species of whale that frequent the waters around Ogasawara, and photos of the whales' fins and flukes has shown that some of them return to the islands year after year. Photographing the whales provides a valuable source of information about their habits.

Female sperm whales and their calves live near Ogasawara year-round and can be found between 10 and 30 kilometers offshore. When diving, sperm whales stick their flukes straight up in the air before plunging to depths of 1,000 meters or more.

Ogasawara is one of the main breeding grounds for humpback whales, which visit the islands during the winter. The first whales arrive in late November, and their numbers are greatest from February through April. Humpback whales breach in graceful arcs and slap the water with their pectoral fins and tails.

Visitors can watch whales from boats or from high vantage points, such as the weather station on Chichijima or the hills of Hahajima. Watching the whales from a whale-watching boat offers the chance to see them up close and hear their calls and vocalizations. Many of the boats use an underwater microphone to amplify the whale songs through a speaker.

When the first humpbacks arrive in November, huge, whale-shaped windsocks are flown in front of the Ogasawara Whale Watching Association building. More and more whales arrive over the next several weeks. During the height of the season, the whales are so numerous that one can generally be spotted every 10 to 15 minutes.