They’re big, shy and seriously endangered – meet the magnificent Bryde’s whale

**BRYDE’S IN BRIEF**

**GENUS:** Balaenoptera  
**SPECIES:** B. brydei, B. edeni, B. omurai  
**SIZE:** 13-15m long, up to 25 tonnes  
**FOUND:** Around New Zealand, South Africa, Japan, California and Mexico, between 40 degrees North and South (Whanganui in New Zealand, and Iwate in Japan, approximately).  
**EATS:** Fish up to the size of a sardine, plus plankton and krill.  
**NUMBER IN NZ:** Around 200, with a population of just under 60 in the Hauraki Gulf.  
**STATUS:** Critically endangered – on NZ’s national top 10 endangered list.

Not many people know these whales exist,” says Dr Pritchard. “They’re beautiful creatures, big, gentle giants, and they’re in our backyard.” He’s doing his bit to raise awareness of the whales with a photographic installation at the Centre for Conservation Medicine at Auckland Zoo, which shows the process of necropsying and burying a dead whale. “Where I think Auckland Zoo is good, is that we have 700,000 visitors through our doors a year,” he says. “When we have Sea Week, we really push this. We’re just trying to tell a story and get people involved.”

**Ships versus whales**

Dr Craig Pritchard, head of the New Zealand Centre for Conservation Medicine at Auckland Zoo, and a member of the forensic team that has been performing necropsies on all recent Bryde’s whales found dead in the Gulf, says the captains of the ships have no way to tell when they strike a whale. “If you were travelling on the Fullers’ ferry and you hit one, you’d know, but if you’re in a 210m container ship, you wouldn’t have a clue. Sometimes the ships will come into the port and they’ll have a whale wrapped around the bow and they won’t even know about it.”

Ships may not even need to be unlucky enough to strike a whale directly, says Dr Constantine – if a big enough ship passes close enough to a whale, the force of the moving water can suck a whale into the ship’s path. “We’ve got a real problem here,” she says. “We’re losing about two whales a year to ship strike, which is probably not okay because of the replacement rate. Bryde’s whales are long-lived, slow-breeding. And we don’t really have a good measure of the impact of ship strike on the whale population because it takes a long time to accumulate the data. It’s not until you’ve had 20 or 30 years of data collection that you can really see the magnitude of the problem.”

Of the 18 whales that have been assessed for cause of death over the last 10 years, a significant majority appeared to have been killed by ship strike. Dr Pritchard says indicators like grazing, bruising, muscular damage and broken bones can show where a whale has been hit by a ship. The most recent necropsy of a 14m female whale also showed she had not reached sexual maturity, meaning that she was killed before having a chance to breed.