



Photo ID - Background Information

Photo ID is a technique used by the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust to monitor whales and dolphins off the west coast of Scotland. We have identified over the years a number of individual animals using close up photos of dorsal fins. This means that the Trust can monitor when and where individual whales and dolphins are, which adds to our understanding of their behavior and distribution.

Ideally the photos are close up shots taken at 90 degrees to the dorsal fin from the left side and the right side of the animal. However, conditions are not always ideal and so we don't always get the perfect 'mug-shot'!

The pictures allow us to take a closer look at the markings and the shape of each dorsal fin. There is amazing variation amongst individuals. Many have nicks or notches along the edge of the dorsal fin which change its profile and make it distinctive. The cause of these nicks is uncertain. Perhaps they are caused by parasites living on the skin of the whale or dolphin. Perhaps it is just a result of wear and tear. For minke whales it is unlikely that they are a result of fights with other whales as this species does not have teeth. In contrast, dolphins may well get their nicks from social interactions with other dolphins.

The Trust keeps a catalogue of photos of all individuals and we have named most of them. So then, when we collect new photos, we can compare our pictures with the characteristics of the dorsal fins of the individuals in the catalogue and make matches.

Using this technique we have found that the same minke whales return to our waters every year to feed. Currently our collaborative Tursiops bottlenose dolphin project has used photo ID to learn that dolphins seen near Mull (in the summer of 2006) are the same animals as those seen off the Tiree coast and also off the Mull of Kintyre and Skye. This is an exciting finding as it indicates that the west coast of Scotland is home to a resident population of bottlenose dolphins. If this finding is true, this would be only the third resident population to be identified in the UK - the others live in Cardigan Bay (Wales) and the Moray Firth (Scotland).