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Whales and Their Relationships with Other Species



Whales, the gentle giants of the ocean, are not just fascinating because of their size but also because of their interactions with other species. These interactions can range from symbiotic relationships, where both species benefit, to instances where whales unintentionally help other animals thrive.

Mutualism: Benefiting Each Other

One of the most well-known examples of mutualism involving whales is their relationship with certain species of fish and birds. When whales feed, they often push schools of fish closer to the surface. Seabirds take advantage of this, diving into the water to catch their prey. The birds benefit by getting an easy meal, and the whales are unaffected, continuing their feeding without competition.

Commensalism: One Benefits, the Other is Unharm

Barnacles, small marine creatures, often attach themselves to the skin of whales. This relationship is an example of commensalism. The barnacles benefit by being transported through nutrient-rich waters, where they can easily filter-feed. Meanwhile, the whale is neither helped nor harmed by the barnacles hitching a ride on its massive body.

Parasitism: One Thrives at a Cost to the Other

Not all relationships are positive for whales. Certain parasites, such as whale lice, latch onto the skin of whales. These parasites feed on the whale's skin and can sometimes cause irritation or wounds. In these cases, the whale is negatively impacted while the parasite gains food and shelter.

Whales and Ecosystem Balance

Beyond these direct relationships, whales indirectly influence countless other species by maintaining the health of their ecosystems. When whales dive and then resurface, they bring nutrients from the ocean depths to the surface, which benefits plankton. Plankton, in turn, forms the base of the marine food web, supporting fish, birds, and other sea creatures.

Through their interactions with fish, birds, and even parasites, whales demonstrate how interconnected life in the ocean truly is. These relationships highlight the important role whales play not just as majestic creatures but also as vital contributors to marine ecosystems.