

Scientists Finally Figured Out Why Whales Do Awesome Leaps Into the Air

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Everybody knows that humpback whales make excellent professional wrestlers: With zero hesitation, these gentle giants will leap out of the sea, corkscrew their bodies, and then slam back into the water with 66,000 pounds of fury.

It turns out that these cetaceans aren't just doing this to show off: According to a recent paper in *Marine Mammal Science*, the breaching serves as an acoustic telegram, communicating with far-off pods. It's like how European or African peoples would send sonic signals from village to village via drum, or how wolves howl at the moon. Make a big enough splash, and the percussion speaks for itself.

As noted in the marine-life publication *Hakai* magazine, University of Queensland marine biologist Ailbhe S. Kavanagh and colleagues observed 76 humpback groups off the coast of Australia for 200 hours between 2010 and 2011. They found that breaching is way more common when pods are at least 2.5 miles apart, with fin- or fluke-slapping deployed when fellow whales are nearby.

The breaching probably carries better than whales' signature songs: "They're potentially using (these behaviors) when background noise levels are higher," Kavanagh tells *Hakai*, "as the acoustic signal possibly travels better than a vocal signal would." Given that whale songs have regional accents, you have to wonder if their aerial gymnastics have a certain patois, too.

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