

Narwhals

(January 2015)

What are narwhals? Besides being in the film, *Elf*, narwhals are called the unicorns of the sea. That is because of the big, horn-like tusk that sticks out from their faces. A long time ago, when the narwhal tusks washed up on shore, people thought the tusks belonged to unicorns. But that is not the case. Those tusks are teeth that grow from the upper jaws of narwhals. That is not the only amazing thing about narwhals. There are lots more amazing facts to find out about these majestic animals.

Narwhals are pale in color. Older narwhals are almost all white, juveniles are blue-black, and infants are blue-gray. As adults, they weigh about 3,500 pounds and they can get up to 20 feet long. They also happen to have two teeth. One of them is that big, long, spiral one that gets up to 8 feet long. It grows up through the narwhal's lip and has tons of nerve endings in it. This makes it sensitive to things around it. Experts think that the tusk is there to impress females or to battle rivals. Female narwhals sometimes grow a small tusk too, but it is not as prominent. Narwhals are related to bottlenose dolphins, belugas, and harbor porpoises. They like to dine on halibut, Arctic and polar cod, shrimp, and squid.

Narwhals are elusive in lots of ways, but experts still know some things about them. They live in the Arctic waters and sometimes travel around Greenland to eastern Russia. Most of the time, they swim slowly, but when predators chase them, they move fast. They are hunted by polar bears, orcas, and native Inuit people. For the Inuit, the narwhal skin is an important source of vitamin C. Narwhals like to swim at the top of the sea, but they can dive 5,000 feet below the waves. In the summer months, narwhals swim close to the shore. In the winter, they swim out to sea and live under ice.

When they are on the move, narwhals travel in pods of 10-100 and sometimes even more than that! They communicate by making all kinds of clicks and trills. If you ever spot a pod of narwhals, they might be crossing their tusks. This is called “tusking.” No one is sure what tusking is, but it is likely a kind of friendly contact or a method for cleaning tusks.

Besides being hunted by predators, narwhals are at risk from the effects of climate change. Their small population size, limited environment, and love for dining on Arctic fish are also at risk of vanishing. All of this negatively impacts narwhals. Some experts

think that the narwhal is more sensitive to climate change than the polar bear!

Narwhals might be at risk of vanishing, but we can help. Some methods include taking part in a symbolic adoption. A person's cash donation will get them gifts such as a certificate, an animal fact sheet, and a plush stuffed narwhal. If adoption is not possible, letters or emails to government leaders can help make them aware of the risks for narwhals. And of course, just learning about narwhals and sharing their story is a big help too.

Teacher Resources

This text passage is archived under Animals.

Text Easability Scores

If you would like to measure the text easability scores of this passage, please follow the directions below.

1. Visit the Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor website at <http://tea.cohmetrix.com/>. If you do not already have a login and password, create one. It is free and easy to sign up for access to the website.
2. Once you have created an account and sign in, you will be taken to a page with an empty, white text box. Copy and paste the text from this passage into the empty, white text box. Make sure you are only copying and pasting the body of the passage. Do not include the title, date, or any of the resources present in the passage.
3. When you have pasted the passage into the text box, click on the red button beneath the text box that says "Analyze." There will be a short delay and after a few seconds, you will see a bar graph appear to the right of the screen.
4. The bar graph will give you the percentages for several text characteristics including: narrativity, syntactic simplicity, word concreteness, referential cohesion, and deep cohesion.
5. Below the bar graph, the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level is also included for your benefit.
6. Lastly, a paragraph is provided that explains the meaning of the measurements of the text characteristics for your particular passage.
7. Once you have completed measuring your passage, you can click on the "Clear" button below the text box and measure another passage, if you so wish.