

Gentle giants head north for winter sojourn

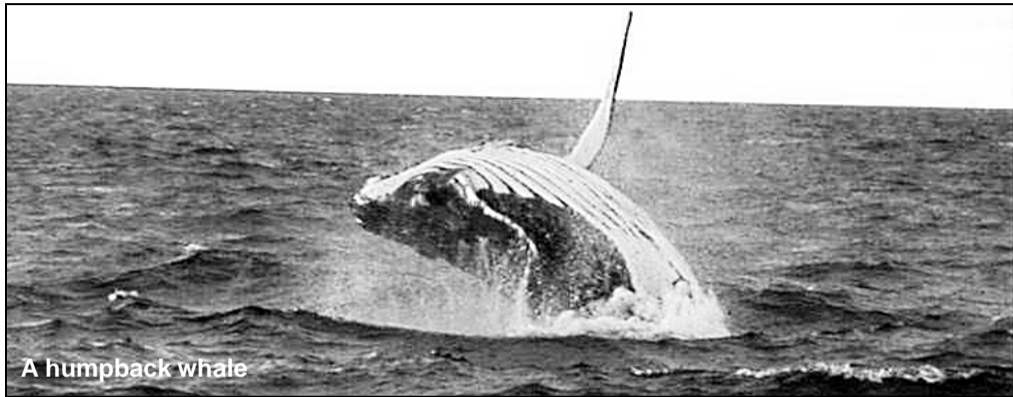
By ANDY TOULSON

MORE than 5000 humpback whales will start passing by the Townsville coastline this month with the start of the whale watching season.

The whale watching season, from June to September, is the winter migration of humpback whales up from the colder southern waters to the warmer waters off the North Queensland coast.

The massive but graceful humpbacks calve and breed along the Great Barrier Reef coast, especially from the Whitsunday region south to the boundary of the Great Barrier Reef marine park.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) said humpback whale sightings usually oc-



curred from late June onwards in the Townsville region, including offshore Magnetic Island.

Conservation group acting director Tony Stokes said the whales could migrate as far

as the waters north of Cairns.

"Though the humpbacks will be the most commonly seen whales in this region, there have been more than 30 different types of whales

recorded on the Great Barrier Reef," said Mr Stokes.

"So it is quite likely to also see the smaller minke whales.

"Since whaling was banned in the 1970s, the numbers of

humpback whales being sighted has greatly increased, by an estimated 12 per cent each year.

"The mothers seem to choose sheltered bays to have their babies, so it is quite possible in the not-too-distant future that they might choose to calve in Cleveland Bay."

Mr Stokes said it was estimated that over half a million people enjoyed whale watching in Australia each year, with more than \$6 million spent on whale watching tours.

But he said it was important to be aware of the need to protect the whales' welfare.

"We have to make sure we don't interfere with them, but allow them to interact with us if they wish," he said.