

Whale maternity ward discovered

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HUNDREDS of baby whales have been discovered in a bay in the Kimberley, making it one of the world's biggest humpback whale nursery grounds.

WA scientists say the natural maternity ward, 160km north of Derby, is being used by humpback whales to teach their calves important marine lessons.

Discovered in Camden Sound, one of the Kimberley's largest bays, 381 pods were found schooling their calves to feed, ride the tides and breach.

WA Marine Science Institution (WAMSI) chief executive Dr Steve Blake said the movement of pregnant females, whales with young calves and bulls into the region was astounding.

"It is a natural maternity ward, the place where mothers teach their calves how to feed and how to utilise the tides and currents," Dr Blake said.

"It was like taking a three-year-old to a children's playground," he said.

The whale nursery ground is surrounded by reef that stretches from the Northern Territory to the south of Broome and researchers say they may have unearthed a coral reef zone of global significance.

"We believe it surpasses the number found in the Caribbean's Silver Banks region, which is usually listed as one of the world's main humpback whale nursery grounds.

"We are now right in the middle of the whale season in the Kimberley."

The whales were discovered as part of an unfunded study by Dr Blake, a team of scientists from Kimberley Whales and two Indigenous representatives.

On the last day of the study, 51 whales passed the scientists' observation site in two and half hours, which equates to more than 20 whales passing each hour.

"This is a conservative figure but it puts Camden Sound right up there in terms of the world's winter residences for humpback whales," he said.

Dr Blake said a highlight of the trip was seeing whales practising breaching by jumping out of the water every 30 seconds for five minutes while their mothers watched on.

