



22 AUG, 2025

## Whale of fortune

Adelaide Advertiser, Adelaide



Page 1 of 1

# Whale of fortune

## Calves will survive toxic bloom, say marine experts

Natasha Emeck

Experts say vulnerable baby whales may be safe from South Australia's algal bloom crisis but other marine mammals such as seals and dolphins could still pay the price as their food supplies are hit.

A southern right whale and her calf were seen pushing through the algal bloom at Port Elliot over the weekend, with another pair spotted off Kingston Park on Tuesday, sparking fears the "slick" could threaten vulnerable calves.

Parts of the state remain clouded by the bloom, including Encounter Bay and Head of Bight, nurseries where mothers calve. However, University of Adelaide marine ecologist Professor Ivan Nagelkerken said there was no evidence that the bloom species, *Karenia mikimotoi*, was a threat to the whales.

"But if other toxic algal bloom species – those that produce toxins that are detrimental to whales – bloom in the coming months, there would be a cause for concern," he said.

"We don't know if that will happen, so species identity of the algal bloom will need to be monitored."

Concerned locals have drawn comparisons to Argentina in 2005, when an algae toxin called *Pseudo-nitzschia* was blamed for a tenfold increase in baby whale deaths.

Professor Nagelkerken said that was not the case in SA.

"*Karenia mikimotoi* is a species that does not produce these toxins, and that's also why the seafood is currently safe to eat," he said. Even so, whales may still feel some discomfort.

"It is an irritant, so you can either inhale particles through the air, or it can irritate skin,"

Professor Nagelkerken said.

"Whales are just like humans, so that's very possible, but that would not be something that you would expect to cause mortality."

"They've got very thick skins – a lot of blubber – so you would expect them to even be better protected than humans in terms of their skin sensitivity."

Professor Nagelkerken said southern right whales fed on krill in deeper waters – not in SA's gulfs – so their food supply was unaffected by the bloom.

"I'm much more worried about the collapse of the food web, leading to loss of food opportunities for bigger fish and sharks and sea lions and so on," he said.

Speaking at the state government's algal bloom update, South Australian Research and Development Institute executive director Professor Mike

Steer confirmed the bloom did not pose a threat to whales.

However, he indicated more research was needed to understand how the mass fish deaths would affect the broader food chain and whether this would, in turn, impact the whales' breeding season.



A southern right whale on SA's Far West coast.