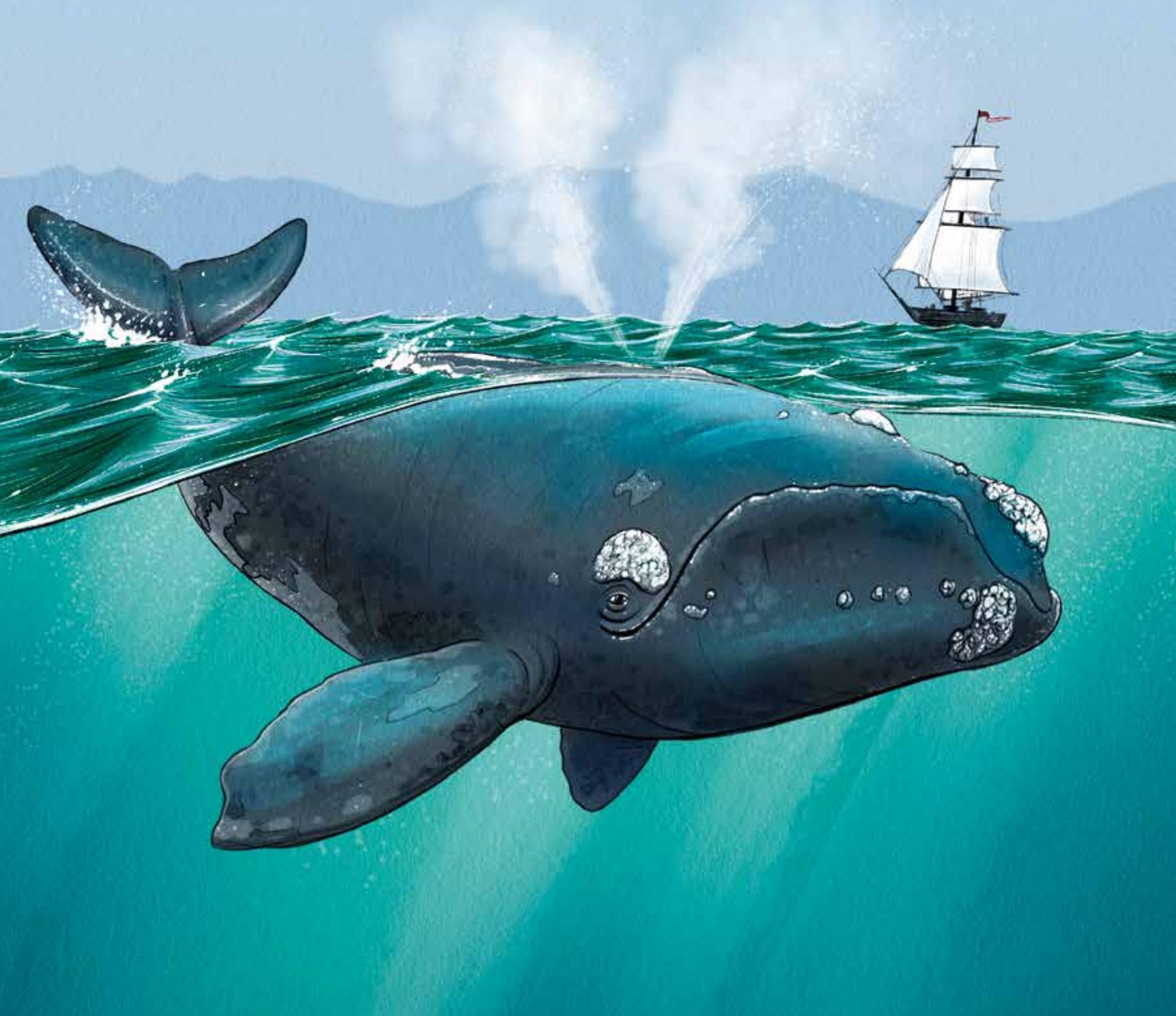


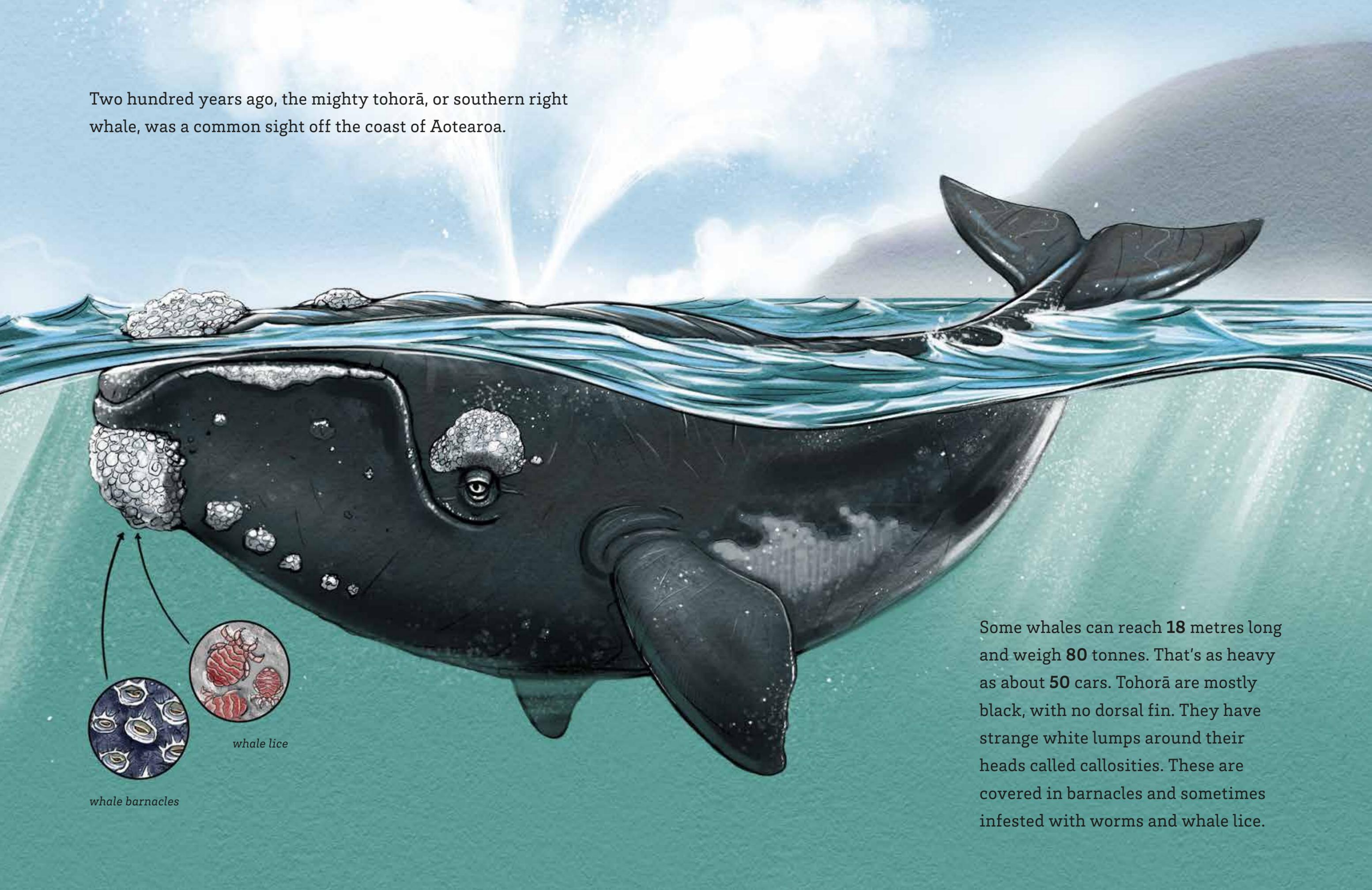
# TOHORĀ

THE SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE



Ned Barraud

Two hundred years ago, the mighty tohorā, or southern right whale, was a common sight off the coast of Aotearoa.

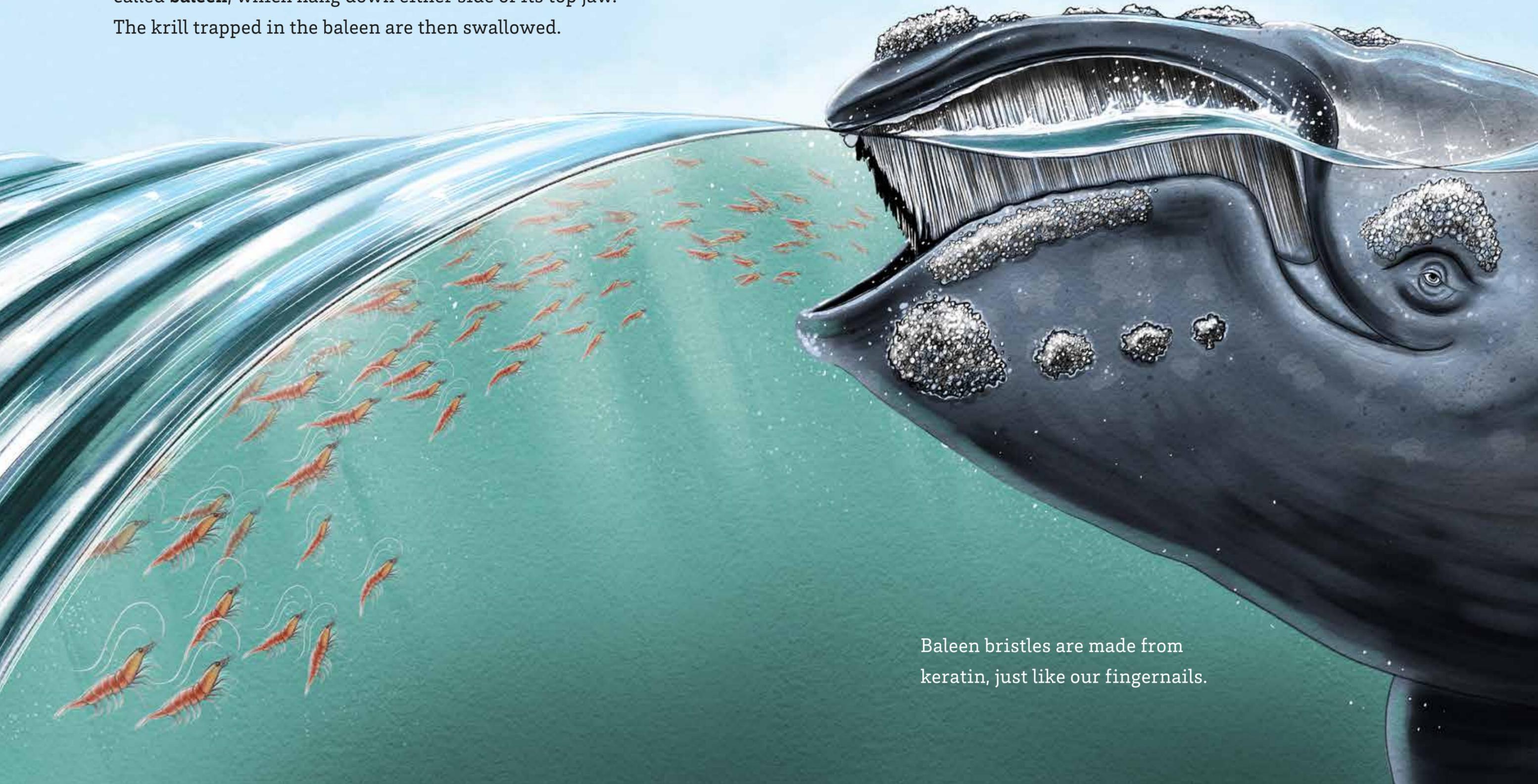


whale barnacles

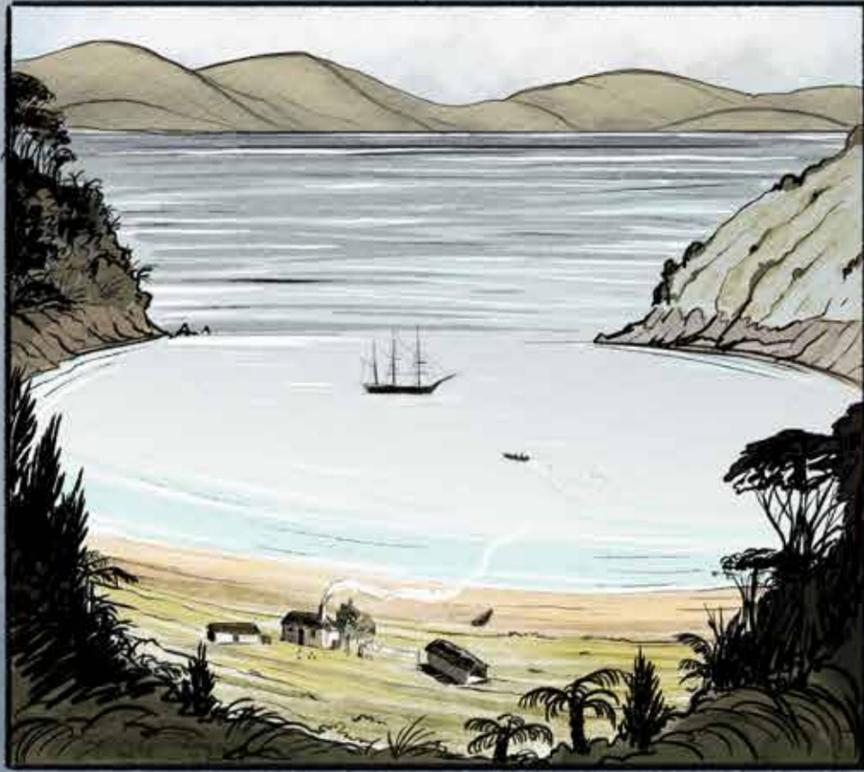
whale lice

Some whales can reach **18** metres long and weigh **80** tonnes. That's as heavy as about **50** cars. Tohorā are mostly black, with no dorsal fin. They have strange white lumps around their heads called callosities. These are covered in barnacles and sometimes infested with worms and whale lice.

The tohorā's main food is krill, a small shrimp-like crustacean. It eats krill by sucking in huge amounts of water and pushing it out through two plates of bristles, called **baleen**, which hang down either side of its top jaw. The krill trapped in the baleen are then swallowed.



Baleen bristles are made from keratin, just like our fingernails.

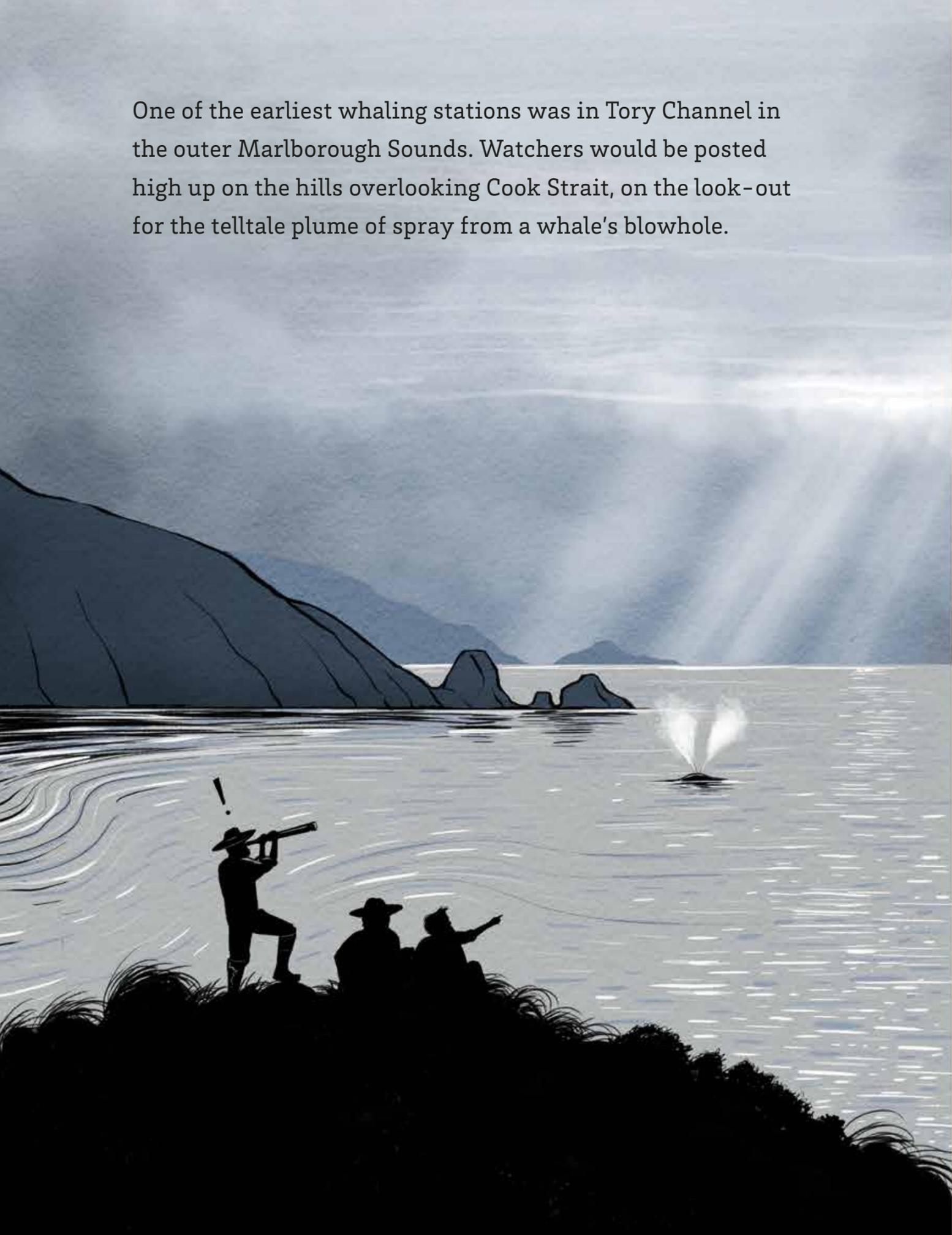


But the tohorā's story became a difficult one in 1791 when the first whaling ship arrived in Aotearoa from America. Whalers were attracted by plentiful whales and the sheltered harbours. Some of the first European settlers in New Zealand were whalers and their families.

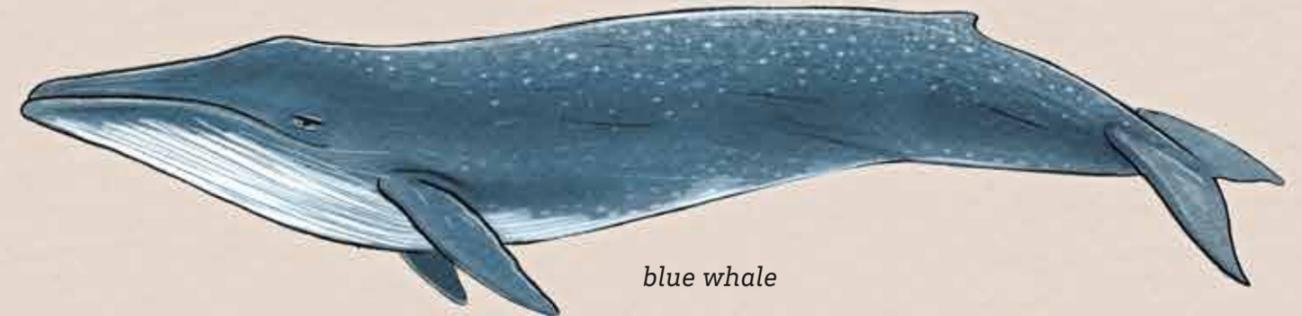
Tohorā soon became known as the 'right' whale as they were considered the right whale to hunt. They stayed close to shore and kept near the surface, and their gentle, curious nature made them an easy target for the harpoon. They also didn't sink when they died, so the whalers' job of recovering tons and tons of valuable blubber was made easier.



One of the earliest whaling stations was in Tory Channel in the outer Marlborough Sounds. Watchers would be posted high up on the hills overlooking Cook Strait, on the look-out for the telltale plume of spray from a whale's blowhole.



*southern right whale*



*blue whale*



*humpback whale*



*sperm whale*

By 1860, tohorā were nearly extinct in Aotearoa and the southern right whale industry had collapsed. Whalers turned their harpoons to other types of whale, such as sperm, blue and humpback whales, which are also found in New Zealand waters.

In July 2018, a southern right whale visited Wellington Harbour.



It put on a show for the locals, waving its flippers, breaching and slapping its tail.

The whale was nicknamed 'Matariki', as a Matariki fireworks celebration in the harbour was postponed. The *Interislander* anchored out in the harbour for an extra hour or two to stay clear.



Perhaps Wellington Harbour will once again become a great meeting place for Aotearoa's mighty tohorā.

