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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Volunteers Count Whales in NOAA's Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary

Over 570 volunteers gathered data from the shores of O'ahu, Kauai, and the Big Island for Saturday's annual Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary Ocean Count. Participants tallied humpback whale sightings and documented the animals' surface behavior during the survey. The sanctuary, which is managed by NOAA, protects humpback whales and their habitat in Hawaiian waters where they migrate each winter to mate, calve, and nurse their young.

Volunteers collected data from 60 sites statewide. Every 15 minutes, an average of 1 whale was counted per site statewide. The following are the average numbers of whales sighted per 15-minute count period on each of the islands:

O'ahu – 2 whales

Kaua'i – 1 whales

Big Island – 1 whales

"The final Count for 2011 was met with both challenges and dedicated volunteers," said Claire Kavanaugh, Sanctuary Ocean Count project manager. "High winds and rain produced low visibility at many sites across the state, which may have contributed to the number of whales observed. Overall, Saturday's event capped off a very successful season in which volunteers observed many whales, displaying a variety of behaviors, as well as an array of other marine wildlife including Hawaiian monk seals, sea turtles, spinner dolphins and many different sea birds."

Scientific studies have shown that Hawaii's humpback whale population has been increasing at an annual rate of approximately seven percent. Over time, data from the Sanctuary Ocean Count can be used to corroborate these findings. Hawaiian waters provide critical breeding habitat for approximately two-thirds of the north Pacific stock of humpback whales. Though this year's Ocean Count may be over it is still important for all mariners and ocean users to exercise caution while out on the water through the end of the season in May.

For more information on becoming a volunteer for the 2012 Sanctuary Ocean Count visit sanctuaryoceancount.org or contact the appropriate sanctuary office. On the Big Island, call 1-888-55-WHALE ext. 253. On Oahu, call 397-2651 ext. 253. On Kauai, call 1-808-246-2860. A whale count on Maui is conducted independently by the Pacific Whale Foundation.

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On the Web:

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary: <http://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov>