

Community Announcement

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Entangled mother humpback with calf freed of gear off Maui

Joint Statement from NOAA Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary and NOAA Fisheries

On Monday, February 14, 2022, a NOAA-led team of trained responders freed an entangled adult female humpback whale outside Lahaina Harbor, Maui, in Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. The adult female, accompanied by her calf and a male escort humpback, had a tight wrap of moderate gauge line wrapped around her head in front of her pectoral flippers. The wrap also included a large bundle of marine debris.

The multi-agency Pacific Islands Large Whale Entanglement Response Team mounted an authorized response. The 6-hour response was especially challenging as all the gear—estimated at more than 550 feet of measurable line—was wrapped tightly around the whale's head, where it posed a significant threat to the animal. Tight wraps on the head also pose danger to the response team, because of the necessity to closely approach the animal.

Once freed, the mother and her calf went into resting behavior, with the calf tucking under the mother's chin. The successful response increased the survival chances for both the mother and her calf.

The debris included a dozen different types of lines and netting, with at least 30 feet of thick line estimated at greater than 1 1/2" in diameter. While the gear sank out of reach and couldn't be recovered, responders obtained critical documentation of the removed gear to determine its possible origins.

The whale was first reported on February 12 by tour vessel Napali Explorer III, with a re-sighting on February 14 by another tour vessel, Trilogy V. The animal was in fair-to-good condition, but the tight wrap had resulted in line scars near her mouth line. The entanglement posed a significant threat to the mother and her calf, and was deemed life-threatening.

The response team included Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, the Ultimate Whale Watch dedicated and trained response team, the U.S. Coast Guard from Station Maui (USCG), NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE), NOAA Corps, Cardinal Point Captains (CPC), and University of Hawai'i at Mānoa - Marine Mammal Research Program (MMRP). Shoreside support was provided by NOAA Fisheries and the state of Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources. The sanctuary's research and response vessel, Koholā, acted as the primary

approach vessel, while patrol vessels from the USCG and OLE provided safety and support. MMRP provided monitoring and aerial assessment support.

Mariners are asked to keep a sharp lookout for whales in distress, but not to approach closely or attempt to assist them. Only trained and well-equipped responders that are authorized under a Marine Mammal Protection Act/Endangered Species Act permit issued to NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program (MMHSRP) are permitted to assist entangled whales and other marine mammals. Immediately reporting an entangled or otherwise injured or distressed whale, is the best way to help the animal.

If you see an injured or entangled marine mammal, keep a safe and legal distance and call the statewide NOAA Marine Wildlife Hotline at 888-256-9840 or the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF channel 16 immediately. If you are reporting a vessel coming too close to a whale, call the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline at 800-853-1964 or email respectwildlife@noaa.gov. Additional guidelines and safety tips can be found at <https://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov/visit/recreation.html>. New recommendations for boat speeds around humpbacks were recently announced by the State of Hawai'i.

It is illegal to approach a humpback whale closer than 100 yards by any means by sea or drone and closer than 1,000 feet by aircraft.

The sanctuary coordinates large whale entanglement response around much of the Hawaiian Islands, while working closely with and under NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Regional Office and NOAA Fisheries' Office of Protected Resources' MMHSRP and their greater response efforts and National Network. NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources provides overall oversight and authorizations. Due to the risks involved for animals and responders alike, large whale entanglement response is a permitted activity under NOAA Fisheries MMHSRP.

A free online course by NOAA and partners provides guidance on how the on-water community can help entangled whales in Hawai'i waters. The U.S. Whale Entanglement Response course helps fishermen, tour boat operators, and whale researchers better assist trained responders disentangle large whales.

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