

Nov. 3, 2023

Mother/calf whale pairs in Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary warrant extra care by ocean users

With the return of humpback whales, or Koholā, to Hawai'i waters, including some early reports of multiple mother/calf pairs, Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary reminds ocean users to keep a safe and legal distance of at least 100 yards from whales, and reduce harassment and possible vessel strikes that pose risks to the animals and ocean users alike.

Two key best practices are for vessel operators to keep a sharp eye out for Koholā and reduce vessel speeds, as both have been shown to reduce the risk of hitting a whale, especially calves, which are particularly susceptible to vessel strikes.

Humpback whale season in Hawai'i generally runs from November through May, when thousands of Koholā return to Hawai'i waters to breed, give birth, and nurse their young.

Go slow, whales below

During Koholā season, especially in water depths of 600 feet or less, boaters are asked to maintain a speed of 15 knots or less (or safe planing speed) to minimize the risk of striking a whale. When directly approaching a whale to view it, or departing from viewing, speed should be reduced to six knots or less within 400 yards.

These speed recommendations for boating around whales were developed jointly by the sanctuary, the State of Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources, Pacific Whale Foundation, and members of Hawai'i's on-water community. These and other best practices can be found at: <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dobor/boating-with-whales/>

Keep a safe distance

Collisions with vessels are a risk to Koholā and humans. It is illegal to approach a humpback whale closer than 100 yards by any means including by boat, kayak, paddleboard, or drone, and closer than 1,000 feet by aircraft.

If you see an entangled whale

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.

Anyone can report Koholā entangled in marine debris. Entanglement may not impact the animal immediately, but can result in starvation, physical trauma and infections, and may contribute to vessel strikes since the animals are less mobile.

Reporting an issue

To report a vessel coming too close to a whale, call the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline at 800-853-1964, email respectwildlife@noaa.gov, or contact your local DOCARE office by phone, email, or on the DLNRTip app, which can be found at <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/blog/2020/07/09/nr20-097/>.

“By following regulations and recommendations, ocean users can reduce their impact on the animals and their habitat and also play an important role by helping monitor humpback whales in sanctuary and nearby waters,” said Ed Lyman, Natural Resource Specialist, Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary.

“By locating and reporting distressed animals and providing initial documentation and assessment of the animal--from a safe and legal distance--ocean users act like first responders and are the foundation of our conservation efforts,” he said.

Additional wildlife viewing guidelines, safety tips, and hotlines can be found at <https://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov/visit/recreation.html>. DLNR’s Division of Boating and Ocean Recreation’s “Boating with Whales” website can be found at: <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dobor/boating-with-whales/>. In their blog, Pacific Whale Foundation explains the multi-organization workgroup that developed the boating speed recommendations: <https://www.pacificwhale.org/blog/go-slow-whales-below-pwf-research-instrumental-in-multi-age-ncy-collaboration-resulting-in-new-voluntary-whale-watch-guidelines/>

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary is one of the world’s most important whale habitats, and the only place in the United States where Koholā mate, calve, and nurse their young.

Designated in 1992, Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary works to protect Koholā and their habitat through research, education, conservation, and stewardship. The sanctuary is administered through a partnership of NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and the State of Hawai’i Department of Land and Natural Resources, Division of Aquatic Resources.

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On the Web:

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary:

<http://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov>

NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov>

State of Hawai’i Division of Aquatic Resources: <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dar/>