



## General Principles for Whale Watching

### IWC68 (2022) REVISION OF GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR WHALE WATCHING<sup>1</sup>

#### (1) MANAGE<sup>2</sup> THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHALE WATCHING TO MINIMISE THE RISK OF ADVERSE IMPACTS:

- i. land-based whale watching minimises adverse impacts on cetaceans and the marine environment and should be the preferred means where possible;
- ii. implement, as appropriate, measures to regulate platform<sup>3</sup> numbers and size, activity, frequency and length of exposure in encounters with individuals and groups of whales;
  - management measures may include closed seasons or areas where required to provide additional protection;
  - ideally, undertake an early assessment of the numbers, distribution and other characteristics of the target population/s in an area;
- iii. promote whale watching activities that do not harass/disturb the cetaceans (i.e., do not interrupt essential behaviours such as feeding, nursing, mating, resting, etc.);
- iv. establish approach distances for vessels to maintain safety for the whales and vessel passengers;
- v. establish approach distances for drones to maintain safety for the whales;
- vi. avoid the development of operations that include direct interactions between humans and cetaceans, such as swimming with or provisioning (feeding) the target species;
  - where such operations are currently in existence, they should be strictly regulated, monitored and evaluated, to minimise the potential impacts on both humans and cetaceans;
- vii. monitor the effectiveness of management provisions and modify them as required to accommodate new information;

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on sustainable wildlife watching please refer to [CMS Resolution 11.29](#) (Rev. COP12) Sustainable Boat-based Marine Wildlife Watching

<sup>2</sup> Wherever 'manage' and 'management' are used, we are referring to adaptive management, which we define as "an iterative process in which practitioners test hypotheses and adjust behaviour, decisions, and actions based on experience and actual changes" in the environment and human and animal behaviour (see Stankey et al., 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Any vessel (with or without engine), aircraft or person in the water.

- viii. where new whale watching operations are evolving, start cautiously, moderating activity until sufficient information is available on which to base any further development;
- where possible, begin with land-based whale watching in conjunction with research, to minimise adverse impacts and to improve understanding of population/s being targeted;
  - support the development of Codes of Conduct, either voluntary or as regulations, to define approach guidelines and the conduct of passengers and operators, so as to minimise adverse impacts;
- ix. as new and evolving technologies becomes available (e.g., drones), start cautiously and limit their use until sufficient information on their potential impacts is available on which to base any further development;
- x. implement scientific research, using all possible platforms, population monitoring and collection of information on operations and possible impacts as an early and integral component of management, including;
- the acoustic environment;
  - habitat quality;
  - emerging technology; and
  - existing activities in the region;
- xi. develop training programs for operators, local guides and communities, and crew on the biology, behaviour and conservation status of target species, interpretation of these aspects, whale watching operation best practises and the management provisions in effect;
- xii. encourage the provision of accurate information to whale watchers through various methods (e.g., written materials, lectures, films), to:
- develop an informed and supportive public;
  - encourage development of realistic expectations of encounters and avoid disappointment and pressure for increasingly risky behaviour;
- xiii. encourage the use of whale watching operations as platforms of opportunity for research;
- xiv. develop training programs for whale watch operators, local guides, and crews on how to best respond to cetaceans that are stranded, entangled, injured, or otherwise in distress, in order to ensure:
- local stranding or entanglement response network organizations are notified about cetaceans in distress or in need of assistance as quickly as possible;
  - appropriate and safe protocols are followed when whale watch vessels remain with stranded cetaceans if responders are available and enroute to the scene
  - if no responders are available, appropriate and safe protocols are followed to document the cetacean(s) and related conditions;

xv. that interventions with live cetaceans (e.g., disentanglements) are not conducted while whale watching activities are ongoing (e.g., when members of the public are on the vessel) for the safety of the public and the cetacean.

## **(2) DESIGN, MAINTAIN AND OPERATE PLATFORMS TO MINIMISE THE RISK OF ADVERSE EFFECTS ON CETACEANS, INCLUDING DISTURBANCE FROM VESSEL PROXIMITY OR NOISE:**

i. vessels, engines and other equipment should be designed, maintained, and operated during whale watching to reduce, as far as practicable, the adverse impacts on target species and their environment;

ii. cetacean species may respond differently to the presence of platforms and the sounds they produce, as well as relative sound intensity or rapid changes in sound; therefore, vessel operators should be aware of;

- the acoustic characteristics of the target species and of their vessel under operating conditions; particularly of the need to reduce as far as possible production of potentially disturbing sound;
- other potential sources of sound in the environment, such as aircraft, large ships moving through the area, drones, fishing vessels, recreational vessels and jet-skis;
- how targeted individuals may respond to the cumulative sound in the environment;
- the number of other vessels in proximity to the individual being observed, including non-commercial and non-motorised vessels, and the need to keep these numbers as small as possible;
- the need to reduce a whale watching vessel's contribution to the overall noise and other potential negative impacts in the environment;
- how quieter platforms such as kayaks, paddleboards, surfboards, etc., are stealthy and can still elicit a startle response or harass cetaceans.

iii. vessel design and operation should minimise the risk of injury to cetaceans should contact occur; for example, shrouding of propellers can reduce both noise and risk of injury;

iv. operators should be able to keep track of whales during an encounter.

## **(3) ALLOW THE CETACEANS TO CONTROL THE NATURE AND DURATION OF 'INTERACTIONS':**

i. operators should have a sound understanding of species - and location-specific behaviour of the cetaceans and be aware of behavioural changes that may indicate disturbance;

ii. travel at slow speeds, less than 10 knots<sup>4</sup>, in areas of known cetacean presence whenever possible;

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<sup>4</sup> <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1890/ES13-00004.1>

- iii. in approaching or accompanying cetaceans, maximum platform speed should be determined relative to that of the cetacean, and should not exceed it once on station<sup>5</sup>;
- iv. use appropriate angles and distances of approach; species may react differently, and most existing guidelines preclude head-on approaches;
- v. do not instigate or encourage direct interaction with a platform;
- vi. avoid sudden changes in speed, direction or noise;
- vii. do not alter platform speed or direction to counteract avoidance behaviour by cetaceans;
- viii. do not pursue<sup>6</sup>, head off, or encircle cetaceans or cause groups to separate or split apart;
- ix. approaches to mother/calf pairs and solitary calves and juveniles should be undertaken with special care;
  - there may be an increased risk of disturbance to these animals, or risk of injury if vessels are approached by calves;
- x. cetaceans should be able to detect a platform at all times;
  - while quiet operations are desirable, attempts to eliminate all noise may result in cetaceans being startled by a platform that has approached undetected;
  - rough seas may elevate background noise to levels at which vessels are less detectable.

#### REFERENCES

- International Whaling Commission. 2005. Report of the Scientific Committee. Annex M. Report of the Sub-Committee on Whale watching. *Journal of Cetacean Research and Management (Supplement)* 7:327-32.
- Stankey, G.H., Clark, R.N. and Bormann, B.T. 2005. Adaptive Management of Natural Resources: Theory, Concepts, and Management Institutions. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-654. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland. 80pp.

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<sup>5</sup> Once the platform is actively 'watching' cetaceans.

<sup>6</sup> Chase (as opposed to follow), causing the whale to change its course or speed.