

Coast Guard kicks off Operation Be Whale Wise

July 5, 2022



The Coast Guard kicks off Operation Be Whale Wise to encourage the public to practice safe whale-watching this summer in the Pacific Northwest.

Operation Be Whale Wise is an effort to educate the public through outreach and enforcement activities, as well as increase the public's stewardship of these local orcas through engagement of "citizen science." Although the endeavor to ensure the safety of protected marine species is continuous, the Operation Be Whale Wise officially begins July 1.

The Coast Guard is working closely with several partner agencies focused on educating the public and raising awareness within the boating community, including enforcing buffer zones and other vessel-related regulations in place to protect the Southern Resident orca population of the Puget Sound.

The Puget Sound and Salish Sea is home to numerous species of marine mammals. The most recognized of these is the Southern Resident Killer Whale. This species of whale is a distinct population of orcas that are genetically unique from their transient counterparts. They have evolved to feed on fish instead of mammals. SRKW continue to be a critically endangered species with only 75 members remaining as of February 2021. It is important to keep our marine friends safe from preventable mishaps.

Federal regulations prohibit vessels from approaching killer whales within 200 yards or parking in the path of killer whales.

In 2019, the State of Washington enacted regulations requiring vessels to remain at least 300 yards away from either side or 400 yards in front of or behind orca whales. Additionally, state regulations require that vessels within a half mile of orcas must reduce speed to less than 7 knots.

As of today, 13 SRKW have been deemed in vulnerable conditions. Four of these whales may be pregnant. The State of Washington has adopted an emergency rule to prevent commercial whale watching vessels from approaching these individual whales or groups in which they are in within 0.5 nautical miles. The additional distance is necessary to ensure the ability of the SRKW's survival is not hindered by the presence of vessels.

Below are guidelines to be whale wise:

Keep your distance: Do not approach or get too close to marine life and stay 0.5 nautical miles away. Look in all directions before planning your approach to view wildlife. Slow down and reduce your speed to less than 7 knots when within a half mile of the nearest marine mammal to reduce your engine's noise and vessel's wake.

Pay Attention: Be vigilant for marine mammal presence. Whales may change directions or surface unpredictably. Move away slowly and cautiously at the first sign of a disturbance or agitation.

Be mindful of your vessel: Place engine in neutral or shutdown and allow the animals to pass if your vessel is not in compliance with regulations. If it's safe to do so, also turn off your fish finder and echo sounders.

Be courteous: Stay on the offshore side of whales when they are traveling close to shore. Always avoid going through groups of porpoises or dolphins. Hold course and reduce speed gradually to discourage bow or stern-riding.

Report whale sightings: The WhaleReport App helps mariners and members of the public practice citizen science by providing a user-friendly tool directly on their tablet or smart phone that displays whale "safety zones." The app also allows the user to report any live, dead, or distressed whale sightings to the appropriate response agency.

Be Whale Wise is a coordinated effort between the U.S. and Canada with multiple commercial, non-profit and environmental non-governmental organizations dedicated to educating the public and raising awareness within the boating community.

For more information, visit [Be Whale Wise](#).

