



# WHALE SENSE: CONSUMER CHOICES MATTER

## *Good practice*

### Description

#### / Introduction

In 2008, NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Office, Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), and NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary partnered on a program to engage US Atlantic whale watching companies in the design of an education and recognition program, called Whale SENSE, which aimed to promote compliance with voluntary whale watching guidelines, improve reporting of entangled whales and live right whale sightings, and set a standard for industry operation and education. Nearly 10 years later, over 40% of Atlantic commercial whale watch companies participate in the program. Program expansion to Juneau, Alaska occurred in 2015. In 2017, Whale SENSE Alaska doubled their number of participants and added three additional Alaskan ports (Ketchikan, Valdez, and Seward).

Marine  
mammals  
management toolkit



In the US, all marine mammal species are federally protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Species listed as endangered or threatened are provided additional protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Regulatory and voluntary approach guidelines vary by region and species, however most management focuses on approach restrictions in order to minimize negative impacts from viewing activities on the species, and make sure vessels are in compliance with the MMPA and ESA mandates.

On the US Atlantic coast, whale watching for commonly viewed species is primarily managed through the implementation of voluntary approach guidelines, with the exception of the North Atlantic right whale where approach within 500 yards is prohibited by law. These voluntary guidelines consist of 19 recommendations, including speed reduction zones, distance recommendations, and operational procedures for viewing large whales. The close approach restriction recommendation for the Atlantic is 100 feet. These guidelines were developed with industry involvement in 1994. In Alaska, there are approach regulations prohibiting vessel approach within 100 yards of humpback whales.

Whale SENSE is a voluntary education and responsible operation program that uses marketing incentives to encourage responsible marine life viewing and increase the standards for educational content provided to whale watch passengers. Participants in Whale SENSE receive annual training for all operators and naturalists; commit to complying with voluntary whale watching guidelines to the best extent practicable; educate their passengers on whale protection laws and safe operational procedures; notify appropriate agencies of whales in distress and stand-by entangled animals when possible; set an example for other boaters on the water; and are evaluated by trained program personnel to make sure they are complying with all applicable program requirements each year. In return, they are allowed to use the program logo onboard their vessels and in their marketing materials in order to allow potential customers the opportunity to differentiate companies concerned with resource stewardship (Cone LLC, 2009).



## / Involved stakeholders

Program development began in 2008 after a study was published by Wiley et. al (2008) showing compliance with the Atlantic voluntary speed reduction zones was low among Massachusetts whale watching companies. Several public meetings were held, soliciting industry input into program development. Local operators served as resources for managers, reviewed draft program documents, and assisted with the development of the annual training.

Strong industry involvement has served as the foundation of the program and each year program partners facilitate calls and solicit feedback from participants on the efficacy and implementation of the program. Suggestions for improvement are often incorporated into the program the following season. To date, feedback has included: modifications to the annual training format; new information that operators and naturalists should be made aware of with respect to vessel and whale behavior; opportunities for new outreach products; and the development of a new program logo that allowed for inclusion of other regions. Additionally, the Alaska fleet was involved in the development of unique evaluation tools and new program display items (ie. vessel flags with the program logo).

Whale watch passengers can access the « SENSE-ible Whale Watch » website (<https://whalesense.org/sense-ible-whale-watches/>) and locate a participating whale watch.

## / Impact

Whale SENSE program success has been measured by the continued growth of the program over the last eight years. Having started with three whale watch companies (8.5% of total Atlantic industry) located in Massachusetts, the Atlantic program has expanded to Maine, New York, New Jersey and Virginia to now includes a total of 16 companies (approximately 50% of total Atlantic industry).

Other milestones include:

- As of 2013, 1 million passengers have been served on Whale SENSE participating companies in the Atlantic.
- Since 2008, at least 10,000 Whale SENSE brochures have been distributed to passengers and at educational events.
- The Whale SENSE website, launched in 2013, has received over 30,000 visitors from 69 countries, with 30% of these visitors viewing the list of participating companies. Assuming the « click throughs » to participating companies resulted in at least 1 ticket sale for that company, as of 2015, the program may have contributed to over \$200K of total whale watch ticket sales.
- Whale SENSE Alaska launched in 2015, and ran a successful season with 7 participants. In 2017, Whale SENSE Alaska expanded to three new communities based on company requests to NOAA.
- Whale SENSE Facebook page, launched in 2014, has over 1,500 likes.
- Whale SENSE Atlantic participants advocated for the program with Alaskan operators when they were determining if they should adopt the program in Juneau.
- Anecdotal conversations with Whale SENSE Alaska participants have indicated that perception among participants is that the program has helped change vessel behavior on the water.
- As of 2015, 17 entangled whales have been reported by Whale SENSE Atlantic participants.
- (NB) North Atlantic right whale sightings reports are directly submitted to a Sightings Advisory System and are therefore not quantifiable but all Atlantic companies have reported that all right whale sightings obtained by the companies have been reported.

## / Innovation

By engaging stakeholders early in the development process, we have been able to develop a program that is practical for companies to implement and that meets the perceived needs of its members.

An integral component of Whale SENSE is to maintain active communication with participants at the management and operational levels. Annual feedback from company crews is incorporated into the program framework and training, allowing for participants to have ownership over the program. This program has been successful in opening dialogue between environmental managers, non-profits, and whale watching companies as well as providing a baseline of education for whale watching operators and naturalists. The program has also been successful in helping companies improve their educational program and inform their passengers that whales are protected animals, and responsible approach is necessary. Several studies suggest educational programming is an important component of a passenger's satisfaction with a whale watching tour. (Andersen & Miller 2006, Orams 2000, and Harms et. al 2014).

Therefore, participation benefits government by helping to meet environmental protection mandates and open constructive dialogue, benefits participants by providing marketing advantage, potentially easing competition between companies on the water, and providing resources for educational programming onboard the vessel, and benefits passengers by providing them with a choice between whale watching companies and opportunity to support marine conservation efforts.



## Analysis

### **/Sustainability**

- Ongoing website hosting and maintenance.
- Ongoing coordination with program partners.
- Ongoing opportunities for open dialogue with whale watching companies.
- Ongoing funding and support for annual vessel evaluation.
- Ongoing marketing of the program through press releases, websites, and social marketing.

### **/Success factors**

- Strong relationships with partner organizations.
- Clear assignments for partner organizations.
- Opportunities to build trust with whale watching community are important before approaching companies about participation.
- Mandates for whale protection are helpful.

### **/Constraints**

Funding and staff time are significant constraints. The program partners need to be able to meet with companies face to face and perform annual on-site evaluations of company's vessel behavior for the program to work. Staff time is also required for program coordination and updates, material development and distribution, and program promotion.

Targeting whale watch passenger audiences to inform them of Whale SENSE is challenging. Some book trips online, some book locally. Many are tourists, but some are from local communities.

### **/ Replicability**

To be replicated, organizations must understand the commitment they are making to implement this kind of program. They must have first hand knowledge of how the whale watching industry operates and the challenges they face. We recommend that partners also have workable knowledge of operating a vessel and informal educational practices. They should also have a significant understanding of marine mammal behavior and how it relates to vessel approach.

This program is very detail oriented. Trainings are made to specifically address the needs and concerns of operators and naturalists specific to region (New England, Mid-Atlantic, Alaska).

They must have the capacity to respond to industry feedback, and focus on building trust with the industry, while still maintaining the program's core requirements.

### **/ Lessons learnt**

U.S. whale watching passengers care about whale protections and making sure vessels are not harming whales. U.S. marine mammal protection laws help encourage stewardship participation, even when specific approach regulations are not in place. There are many indirect benefits to working more closely with whale watching companies and providing educational opportunities, including increased and timely reports of entangled whales (therefore contributing to the species' conservation and management).

For a program like this to work, trust with industry is key. You build trust with face-to-face meetings, and listening to and encouraging feedback on how to make the program practical for their region and the species they are viewing. Acting on concerns raised by the industry is paramount to maintaining trust.

## Conclusion

Overall, participating companies have a favourable perspective of their participation in Whale SENSE and the re-enrolment rates and increase in participation requests indicate that companies find a benefit to their participation.

By providing detailed training opportunities, we are able to explain the importance of adhering to whale watching guidelines/regulations, provide background information on species and species behaviour (knowledge acquired from whale watching captains) for new operators and naturalists, and allow consumers the opportunity to choose between whale watching companies.



## Marine mammals management toolkit

### Whale SENSE: Consumer Choices Matter

#### Authors:

Allison Rosner (NOAA-Atlantic),  
Suzie Teerlink (NOAA-Alaska),  
Monica Pepe (Whale and Dolphin  
Conservation), Regina Asmutis-  
Silvia (Whale and Dolphin  
Conservation)

#### Marine protected areas:

Stellwagen Bank National Marine  
Sanctuary (SBNMS)

#### Location/geographical coverage:

North and Mid Atlantic U.S. waters  
(from state of Maine south to  
Virginia) and Alaska.

#### Category:

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#### Contact details:

Allison Rosner: [Allison.rosner@noaa.gov](mailto:Allison.rosner@noaa.gov),  
[noaa.gov](mailto:noaa.gov), [suzie.teerlink@noaa.gov](mailto:suzie.teerlink@noaa.gov),  
[monica.pepe@whales.org](mailto:monica.pepe@whales.org)

URL: [www.whalesense.org](http://www.whalesense.org)

#### Documents:

Whale SENSE provides a voluntary accreditation to commercial whale watching participants. Trainings modules are recorded and are provided on the website electronically as self-guided modules or in person by one of the Whale SENSE partners (preferred for first time participants).

- Whale SENSE Naturalist Training (Atlantic & Alaska)
- Whale SENSE Operator Training (Atlantic & Alaska)

On board materials produced include fact sheets on: species ID, US marine mammal protection laws, marine mammal behavior, proper reporting for dead/injured/entangled whales, reporting North Atlantic right whale sightings, and other locally relevant topics related to a whale watching tour for either Alaska and Atlantic.

#### Keywords:

Whales, commercial whale watch, marine stewardship, ocean literacy education, cause marketing recognition, voluntary accreditation, whale watch guidelines.



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