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Know the marine mammal rules!

By Peter Hamilton

All Canadians and Americans preparing their boats for the 2008 boating season should also be up to date on U.S. marine mammal protection regulations and other new rules.

Orcas

Both the U.S. and Canadian governments have designated orcas as endangered species and have implemented orca recovery plans.

Orcas, also known as killer whales, are the largest members of the dolphin family. All family members live together for their entire lives in "pods." The Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW) are the J, K and L pods. While Js spend most of their lives in B.C. and Washington waters the Ks and Ls usually return in June and will stay until the winter. J pod has been traveling through local waters off Point Roberts. There are less than 90 orcas in total.

Governor Christine Gregoire signed into law on March 28, 2008 legislation that further bolsters efforts to protect resident orcas. The new law establishes a 300-foot zone around orca whales that vessels must avoid. The law provides the department of fish and wildlife with enforcement tools. Blocking the pathways is strictly prohibited

A new San Juan Island ordinance regulates the operation of vessels in proximity to SRKWs and established fines of \$750 for violations such as failing to yield to orcas in San Juan County waters.

Seals

It is illegal to pickup, touch or feed any wildlife. This includes both live and dead seals.

Moms will drop off their babies on shore and go off to feed. They are often mistaken as injured or abandoned. Unless the pup is obviously injured and/or entangled with nets the pup must be monitored for 24 to 48 hours.

People and animals must be kept away from the pup because the mom considers them a threat and will not come back to feed her baby. If a human touches the pup it will not stop the mom from reuniting with her baby if the pup is left alone.

For orcas, seals and other marine wildlife the penalties and fines are strictly enforced in the U.S. Under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act penalties include a civil penalty of up to \$10,000 for each offense or criminal prosecution with a fine of up to \$20,000 or imprisonment for up to one year, or both.

Lifeforce Marine Life Programs

Lifeforce is a non-profit ecology organization and will be returning to Point Roberts on a regular basis in 2008. Lifeforce will be conducting the following programs:

1. Whale and Dolphin Hotline. Lifeforce provides a telephone hotline for the public to be able to report marine wildlife stranding, harassment and/or sightings.
2. Orca Research. Lifeforce is presently in the final development stages of employing sound technology to attract orcas away from harm in the event of oil spills and other environmental hazards.
3. Orca Trails. This land-based whale watch program alerts park managers and the public when orcas and other cetaceans will pass their marine parks.
4. Lifewatch Boater Awareness Program. Lifeforce distributes whale watch guidelines and orca field guides to boaters on the water and to the general public.
5. Marine Wildlife Rescue. Lifeforce provides a 24-hour service to respond to marine wildlife injury, sickness, abandonment, stranding and other emergencies.
6. Marine Educational Materials and Displays. Lifeforce publishes educational materials and we also create educational displays for the orca center in Point Roberts.
7. Orca Recovery Plans. Over the years Lifeforce has contributed to the development of orca recovery plans and to improve marine mammal protection regulations. Whale watch businesses and research operations must be change. This would include giving orcas a day off from the continuous harassment of boats from sunrise to sunset.
8. Orca Awareness Month - June 2008. Some orca populations are transboundary species sharing both Canadian and US waters. In recognition for the need to protect these endangered species Lifeforce will participate in joint BC and Washington activities.

If anyone is concerned about orcas, seals or any wildlife call Lifeforce and we will investigate, monitor and contact appropriate agencies. The phone number is 604/649-5258.

The enforcement agencies are: In U.S. – National Marine Fisheries Service – 800/853-1964; In Canada – Department of Fisheries and Oceans – 800/465-4336

(Any wildlife found in the U.S. cannot be legally transported to Canada without authorization.)

(Peter Hamilton is executive director of Lifeforce)

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