

DRAFT
DISCUSSION PAPER

Boat Traffic Threats to Southern Resident Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*): A Model Whale Watching Plan for Endangered Orcas



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Contents

Introduction:	
Boat Traffic Threats to Southern Resident Killer Whales (<i>Orcinus orca</i>): A Model Whale Watching Plan for Endangered Orcas	1
Training and Licensing	
Boat Operators	2
Boat Nature Interpreters	2
Eco Certification	2
Whale Watch Zones	
Zone	2
Map 1 - Southern Community Whale Watching Area	3
Map 2 - Georgia Strait/Vancouver Area	3
Map 3a and 3b - Haro Strait to Rosario Strait	4
Map 4 - Victoria/Sooke	5
Approach To Zones	5
Time in Zones	5
Number of Boats	5
Max Number of Zones	5
Max Number of Boat Trips per company boat	5
No Whale Watch Zones	
Zones	6
Map 5 – Active Pass	6
Map 6 – President’s Channel area; Speiden Channel area ;San Juan Channel area	6
Marine Wildlife Monitoring	7
Company Logs	7
Violations	7
Land-based Whale Watching: Orca Trails	7
Appendixes	
Appendix I – Marine Mammal Regulations	8
Appendix II - Company Recording Procedures	8
Appendix III - List of Agencies Monitoring and Responsible for Violations	8
Appendix IV - “Monitoring Issues in BC and WA: Friendly Persuasion and Aquarium Pets?”	8
Appendix V – Model Monitoring Standards	8

Introduction:

Boat Traffic Threats to Southern Resident Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*):

A Model Whale Watching Plan for Endangered Orcas

Boat Traffic Threats

Whale watching can be a peaceful experience but presently it a threat to the Southern Community. The J, K and L pods in this community are designated as an endangered species. Many boaters are unaware of "Whale Watching" guidelines. Lifeforce distributes the guidelines to boaters on the water and to the general public. The information advises pleasure boaters, commercial boaters, jet skiers and seaplane operators how to safely watch whales and other marine life. Lifeforce helps stop boaters who inadvertently or intentionally harass marine mammals.

Threats to the Southern Community such as dwindling food sources and environmental pollution will not be resolved immediately but we can immediately reduce some of the threats through enforceable boating regulations. By controlling the boat traffic we can immediately reduce noise pollution/boat traffic that interrupt foraging patterns and cause stress that affects the immune systems. We can also stop/reduce boat collisions that could injure and kill orcas.

A major change in boat-based whale watching is essential for the survival of orcas. There is an urgent need for strong regulatory measures to ensure it. This population is extremely vulnerable to human and environmental threats.

A Model Plan: Whale Watch Zones

Guidelines and regulations regarding whale watching activities worldwide have been reviewed and outlined in our recommendations for Marine Mammal Regulations, 2004 (Appendix I). The best rules that are applicable to whale watching on the BC/WA West Coast can be used to form a model plan for ecotourism businesses to watch orcas and other wildlife.

This discussion paper looks at changing the face of present whale watching activities. It would replace the haphazard, prolonged presence of commercial boats with organized Whale Watching Zones and No Whale Watching Zones in the present high traffic areas. This would, in turn, reduce many of the copycat behaviours by pleasure boaters who mimic improper boat operations by the whale watch companies.

Whale Watch Zones: Water and Land

On the Water

The travel patterns of the Southern Community are very predictable and would support the creation of designated water zones for whale watching. These Whale Watch Zones would be marked by GPS and land coordinates. The zones would be approximately 2 miles apart. Commercial boats would wait within the zone for the orcas. The number of boats would be limited and the number of zone visits restricted.

On Land

The plan that would also incorporate land-based whale watching through Lifeforce's Orca Trails program.

No Whale Watch Zones

No Whale Watch Zones must designated in all areas where regulations cannot be adhered to and in high boat traffic areas where navigation cannot be conducted in a safe manner. These areas should also provide sanctuaries for orcas to be able to have a break from continuous whale watching activity. No Whale Watch Zones would prohibit both commercial and pleasure craft.

Conclusion

This model would also incorporate Ethical Eco Tourism Standards by training and licensing operators. The implications of keeping dolphins in swim-with and petting programs should also address any impact on watching dolphins in the wild (see "Monitoring Issues in BC and WA: Friendly Persuasion and Aquarium Pets?", Appendix III)

Lifeforce hopes to work with others to develop this model. Lifeforce has been monitoring this problem for 12 years in order to form this basis for discussion. Further work will help refine this model plan that could be used by ecotourism businesses operations throughout the world.

Training and Licensing

Boat Operators

Whale Watch Companies and other related ecotourism businesses (including companies using aircraft) must pass a compulsory written test in order to receive an annual License/Permit to Operate. Inspections will determine if they are in violation of permits and are subject to suspension or cancellation.

Boat Nature Interpreters

All staff must be trained. Training should include safe boating competency testing and knowledge of marine wildlife behavior. Educational material should include materials such as Liferforce's Orca Field Guide.

Eco Certification

Whale Watch Companies will display an [Ethical Certificate of Operation](#). This seal of approval would appropriately be a "Whale of Approval"

Whale Watch Zones

The creation of designated water zones for commercial whale watching would be marked by GPS and land coordinates. The zones would be approximately 2 miles apart. The zones would be ¼ mile off shore. Commercial boats would wait within the zone for the orcas.

The following is a list of possible Whale Watch Zones. Numbers 1 to 19 are the same as the Operators' List that they use to give locations of orcas to each other. The others are locations recommendations by Liferforce for areas not presently on the companies' lists.

Operators' Location List (A selected number of locations would be allowed)

Haro Strait to Rosario Strait - Maps 2 and 3b

- 1 – East Point
- 2 – Monarch Head
- 3 – Blunden Island
- 4 – Mouat Point
- 5 – Active Pass (south Entrance)
- 6 – Turn point
- 7 – Kellet Bluff
- 8 – Kelp Reef
- 9 – Lime Kiln Lighthouse
- 10 – False Bay
- 11 – Eagle Point
- 12 – Salmon Bank
- 13 – Iceberg Point
- 14 – Colville Island
- 15 – Bird Rocks
- 16 – Strawberry Island
- 17 – Lawrence Point
- 18 – Village Point
- 19 – Turn Island

Other Liferforce recommended locations

Haro Strait to Rosario Strait – Map 3a

- 20 - Patos island to Rosario
- 21 - Alden Bank
- 22 - Lummi Island
- 23 - Birch Bay

Georgia Strait/Vancouver Area – Map 2

- 24 - Boundary Bay
- 25 - Coal Port/Sturgeon Banks
- 26 - Mid Georgia Strait
- 27 - South Arm Fraser River
- 28 – Iona Jetty
- 29 - North Arm Fraser River
- 30 – Bowen Island
- 31 - Porlier Pass

Victoria/Sooke Area – Map 4

- 32 – Trail Island
- 33 – Discovery Island
- 34 – To be discussed
- 35 – To be discussed
- 36 – Race Rocks (or No Whale Watch Zone)
- 37 – To be discussed

Map 1 – Southern Community Whale Watching Area



WHALE WATCH ZONES

Map 2 – Georgia Strait/Vancouver Area



WHALE WATCH ZONES
Maps 3a and b – Haro Strait to Rosario Strait



WHALE WATCH ZONES
Map 4 – Victoria/Sooke



Approaching Whale Watch Zones

Operators should not be within 2 miles of any orca activity. To further reduce boat traffic congestion travel to zones must be taken utilizing routes not in view of whale watch activities and not taken by the orcas. All operators must allow enough time to reach and/or proceed to a designated zone(s).

Time Limits

Commercial and recreational vessels must be restricted by both number of boats and time allowed on scene. When they are waiting in designated zones the time could vary depending on the arrival of the boat followed by the orcas.

During any unexpected chance meeting, the maximum time for being in the presence of orcas should be 30 minutes.

In addition, when pleasure boats are present commercial vessels must stand down until the pleasure craft can be advised of this safe boat operating procedures. They would be advised by organizations conducting monitoring activities.

Number of Boats

The maximum number of commercial whale watch boats in any Whale Watch Zone shall be 10 vessels. It may be less if boats will be within the allowed proximity of the orcas. When this number is reached then other boats shall proceed to the next Whale Watch Zone.

Since pleasure craft operators may follow commercial operators the number may exceed the commercial quota as long as the boats do not impede the movement of orcas and/or violate any rules.

Maximum Number of Zones per Trip

The maximum number of zones attended by any one company shall be two zones for each trip.

Maximum Number of Boat Trips per Day

The maximum number of boat trips per day per boat shall be two.

No Whale Watch Zones

No Whale Watch Zones must be created in all areas where regulations cannot be adhered to and in high boat traffic areas where navigation cannot be conducted in a safe manner. These locations should also provide sanctuaries for orcas to be able to have a break from continuous whale watching activity. The areas would include in Canada - Active Pass (Map 5) and in the US - President's Channel area; Speiden Channel area; and Southern San Juan Channel area (Map 6). No Whale Watch Zones would prohibit both commercial and pleasure craft.

NO WHALE WATCH ZONES

Map 5 – Active Pass



NO WHALE WATCH ZONES

Map 6 – President's Channel – Speiden Channel – San Juan Channel



Marine Wildlife Monitoring

Marine Mammal Monitoring Standards and Enforcement Policy, such as those being developed by Liferforce, should be used for training and operation standards for organizations that are monitoring boater's adherence to present guidelines and future regulations.
(See Model Monitoring Standards - Appendix IV)

Company Logs

All companies must provide Weekly Marine Wildlife Reports when requested by authorized agencies. This would include information from the number of trips to species encountered.

Violations

All violations by commercial and pleasure boaters shall be reported by whale watch companies and others immediately to appropriate authorities.

Land-based Whale Watching: Orca Trails

A land-based Orca Trails Program should be developed. Liferforce is conducting a project called Orca Trails Whale Watching. This is a unique education program to promote land based whale watching in BC and Washington State. We hope that this will help manage potential increases in boat activity.

Orca Trails is a result of our twelve-year study of orcas. We can advise park managers and the public when the orcas will pass by certain park areas. The public can call us for information about land-based whale watch areas so they can plan hikes, camping trips and other types of outdoor recreation. Lifewatch will help protect marine ecosystems and the orcas by promoting ecologically friendly outdoor lifestyles for land lovers and boaters.

As part of this program we will also look at the possibility of using boats to take people to the parks. Any such boat traffic would not come into contact with the orcas. Marine Parks could incorporate drop off points and various types of tourism related businesses and park programs could be developed.

In marine parks any existing moorage could be utilized for the combined nature hikes and orca watching – non-invasive wildlife experiences.

Appendixes

Appendix I – Marine Mammal Regulations (Previously recommended by Liferforce)

Appendix II - Company Recording Procedures (Required information to be discussed.)

Appendix III - List of Agencies Monitoring and Responsible for Violations
To be added.

Appendix IV - "Monitoring Issues in BC and WA: Friendly Persuasion and Aquarium Pets?" *Abstract: As we all seek the best management approaches to ecotourism and recreational activities the Liferforce Foundation raises the questions "Should education programs include friendly persuasion to reduce harmful boat traffic?" and "Are the captive dolphin programs instilling speciesist attitudes towards dolphins in the wild?"*

Appendix V – Model Monitoring Standards