



Photo: AECO

Cetaceans

Whale Watching



Encounters with cetaceans are a common phenomenon in the Arctic and the number of species during the summer is around 15. The variety is great – ranging from the largest animal on the planet, the blue whale, to one of the smallest cetaceans of them all, the harbor porpoise – as well as perhaps the most peculiar of them all, the narwhal.

Regulations

The Arctic consists of several nations and states that may or may not have legislation or guidelines for approaching cetaceans. Ensure that you are aware of any legislation for whale watching in the area where you operate.



Photo:AECO

The beluga whale or white whale is an Arctic and sub-Arctic cetacean. Photo from Svalbard with glaucous gulls on the ice behind the whales.



Photo: Quark Expeditions

Individuals can be identified by their tail flukes. In recent years citizen science photographs have contributed to more knowledge of migration.



Photo: Quark Expeditions

The humpback whale and other baleen whales congregate in the Arctic for summer feeding.

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Guidelines

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is an unparalleled experience.

Marine mammals may be inquisitive and approach vessels and watercraft, and if they want to interact, they will stay with the vessel. It is best for the vessel to drift passively during such encounters. To avoid disturbance when close to these majestic animals, please be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

- Do not chase or pursue whales. Animals may alter their behavior if they are disturbed. When in doubt, err on the side of caution, and give the animals time and space.
- Never herd (surround), separate or scatter a group of marine mammals, particularly mothers and young. Where appropriate, stay where they can see you.
- Stay with the animal up to a maximum of thirty minutes when within 300 meters distance. If signs of disturbance or change in behavior occur at any time during encounters, retreat slowly and quietly.
- When close to marine mammals keep your voice low, do not whistle or shout. Keep radio volume down.
- Communicate with other boats to minimize disturbance to animals.
- Never attempt to touch or feed animals.
- Playback of underwater sound of any kind should not occur. Use hydrophones with consideration and only for passive listening.

- If a whale approaches a vessel to bow-ride, maintain a relatively constant course and speed, or reduce speed gradually. Do not enter a group of dolphins to encourage them to bow-ride.
- Be aware of other boats and obstacles, e.g., shoreline to ensure the animal is never boxed in. Ensure that travel and exit routes for the animal are clear.
- Approach cetaceans from a direction parallel to them and (ideally) slightly to the rear (in the four or eight o'clock position), not from the front and preferably not directly from behind the animal.

Go slow when you see a blow! Use common sense and approach with caution and respect.

Signs of disturbance

Keep a watch for the following behaviors, which could indicate that an animal is agitated and no longer interested in maintaining contact with your vessel. Where these behaviors are noted, keep your distance, move slowly away and/or let the animal depart:

- Changes in travelling direction, regular changes in direction or speed, moving away from the area, apparent general agitation, hasty dives.
- Breaching, tail lobbing and flipper slapping may be an indication that the whales are socializing and may not be aware of boats. Keep your distance.

Approaching whales

When approaching marine mammals that are in the water (for all vessels – ships, Zodiacs, kayaks, etc.)

Zone 1: <3000 meters/9840 feet.

Searching zone: reduce speed and post a lookout.

Zone 2: <300 meters/985 feet.

Slow zone: reduce speed to no more than five knots.

Zone 3: <50 meters/165 feet.

Stop zone: Put your engine in idle.

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If you want to turn the engine off, first idle for a few minutes before shutting down. Try to avoid abrupt changes in noise that may startle or disturb the animal, including excessive engine use, gear changes, maneuvering or backing up toward the animal. Avoid the use of bow or stern lateral bow thrusters to maintain position as these can produce high-pitched noise and intensive cavitation.

Departure from scene of whale watching

Move off at a slow, no-wake speed to 100 meters/300 feet. Avoid moving in front of the animal. Never chase or pursue departing animals.

