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NOAA, Partners Launch Effort for Tour Operators to Protect Whales
Whale SENSE Recognizes Responsible Whale Watch Companies

NOAA has joined with private industry and conservation groups to launch Whale SENSE, a new voluntary program that encourages whale-watch tour operators from Maine to Virginia to practice responsible viewing. The program will also recognize businesses that discourage the harassment of whales in the wild and promote good stewardship.

The program was developed by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service's northeast region and Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary in partnership with the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, and several New England commercial whale watching companies.

The United States has the largest whale watching industry in the world and whale watch vessels often play important roles in reporting and standing by injured, sick, entangled or ship struck animals until help arrives. All whales are protected under federal laws, including the Marine Mammal Protection Act, that safeguard them from being injured, killed, or harassed and having their important natural behaviors interrupted.

"Tour companies in the Whale SENSE program that prioritize education and responsible whale watching could be very attractive to potential customers who spend quite a lot to view these animals in their natural habitat," said Allison Rosner, a biologist with NOAA's Marine Fisheries Service Office of Protected Resources and NOAA program coordinator for Whale SENSE.

According to a recent report from the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the whale watching industry contributed nearly \$1 billion to the nation's economy in 2008.

"Whale watching in this region is an important part of the local economy," said Regina Asmutis-Silvia, senior biologist for the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society. "It must be done responsibly to keep from accidentally injuring or harassing the animals while they engage in vital behaviors like nursing, feeding, or resting."

Program coordinators say Whale SENSE will recognize companies with good stewardship practices, promote high standards of education, and harness their ability to encourage others to care about whales and practice responsible viewing themselves.

To become a Whale SENSE participant, company vessel operators and the naturalists who narrate tours, are required to attend annual training on safe operations and whale ecology. Through these workshops, companies learn more about passenger education, whale watching guidelines and regulations, and good marine stewardship practices. Once a participant company has completed the program, it is granted full use of the Whale SENSE logo and becomes listed on the Whale SENSE website.

Massachusetts-based Hyannis Whale Watcher Cruises, Dolphin Fleet, and Massachusetts Bay Lines, are among the first companies to participate in Whale SENSE.

“We believe it is the responsibility of the whale watching industry to set higher standards for safe navigation around the whales, as well as educating the public in their understanding of the marine life and how humans affect these habitats” said Steve Milliken, owner of the Dolphin Fleet. “We think it is important to do more than simply watch whales. We have to protect them, too.”

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On the Web:

Whale SENSE: <http://www.Whale SENSE.org/>