



NOAA NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
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Protecting Whales Focus of NOAA/Industry Program for Tour Boat Operators

Recognizing businesses that discourage the harassment of whales in the wild and promote good stewardship is one of the goals of Whale SENSE, a voluntary education and recognition program that encourages whale-watch tour operators from Maine to Virginia to practice responsible viewing.

The program was developed last year by NOAA Fisheries Service, Northeast Region and NOAA's 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, and entangled animals or those struck by ships 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 natural behaviors interrupted.

"The public wants to view these animals in their natural habitat, and will find tour companies that value education and responsible whale watching very attractive," said Allison Rosner, a biologist with NOAA Fisheries Service's Office of Protected Resources and the Whale SENSE program coordinator for NOAA.

"Whale SENSE highlights those companies operating in an environmentally responsible manner and are role models for the rest of the fleet," said Craig MacDonald, Superintendent of the Sanctuary.

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

"With the threat of commercial whaling once again a reality, it is critically important to show the world that whale watching, not whaling, is the best future for us, and for the whales," said Regina Asmutis-Silvia, senior biologist for the Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society.

Companies participating in Whale SENSE agree to minimize negative impacts of whales by engaging in responsible viewing practices, by providing customers with a high standard of education, and by promoting ocean stewardship and conservation.

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.

“Dolphin Fleet is proud to be a part in the Whale SENSE program, so we can show our staff’s commitment to educating the public while safely navigating around the marine life we visit,” said Steve Miliken of Dolphin Fleet Whale Watch on Provincetown, Mass. “Participating in this program helps us to improve awareness of the whale watching guidelines within the Northeast whale watching community and give our patrons the opportunity to understand the importance of protecting the whales we see.”

Massachusetts-based Hyannis Whale Watcher Cruises, Dolphin Fleet, Captain John Boats and Massachusetts Bay Lines are among those companies participating in Whale SENSE. The Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center in Virginia Beach is also a participant.

“We hope participation will grow as the whale-watching community recognizes the value of engaging in education, conservation and stewardship,” Rosner said. “It’s a win-win situation for the companies, for the public, and most of all, for the whales.”

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Related Links:

Whale Sense: <http://www.whalesense.org/>

Marine Mammal Viewing in the Northeast U.S.: http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/mmv/