

Vessel Regulations to Protect Puget Sound Killer Whales

NOAA Fisheries issued new rules today on vessel traffic, aimed at protecting Southern Resident killer whales in Washington's Puget Sound. These charismatic marine mammals, popular with tourists, whale-watch operators and the general public, were added to the Endangered Species list in late 2005.

The Southern Resident population peaked at 97 animals in the 1990s, and then declined to 79 in 2001. It has seen slow growth since then, and now stands at an estimated 86 killer whales, about half of which are sexually mature. Scientists have identified the major threats facing the population as a shortage of its preferred prey of Chinook salmon, disturbance from vessels, and water pollution.

The new rules prohibit vessels from approaching any killer whale closer than 200 yards and forbid vessels from intercepting a whale or positioning the vessel in its path. This doubles the current approach distance of 100 yards.

The rules go into effect in early May and apply to all types of boats, including motor boats, sail boats and kayaks, in Washington's inland waters.

Exemptions to the rules for safety include vessels actively fishing commercially, cargo vessels traveling in established shipping lanes, and government and research vessels.

The whales, which depend on their highly sophisticated natural sonar to navigate and find food, can be affected by underwater noise from boats and disturbed by vessels, including non-motorized ones, that approach too close or block their paths. The agency's killer whale recovery plan, released in early 2008, calls for actions to reduce disturbance from vessels.

When the regulations were originally proposed in July 2009, they included a half-mile wide no-go zone along the west side of San Juan Island from May 1 through the end of September, where vessels were prohibited. Because of the extensive responses that were received during the public comment period, the final regulations do not include the no-go zone, and NOAA Fisheries will instead continue to gather information to consider the concept in future rulemaking.

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