



**NOAA**

**NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION**  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



**August 23, 2012**

## **STATEMENT FROM NOAA ON RECENT WHALE AND HUMAN INTERACTION**

SAN LUIS OBISPO, Calif. – Humpback whales recently seen near Port San Luis Obispo and other locations off the San Luis Obispo County coast are chasing and feeding on small prey fish. And while their “lunge” feeding behavior makes for sensational photographs, there is a significant threat to humans who get too close to these wild, feeding giants. In addition, whales may also suffer since disturbance and stress caused by boaters can affect their energy reserves and overall health.

So, for the health of the public and the whales, people should not get too close to these animals. As a rule of thumb, boaters, including kayakers and paddleboarders, should stay at least 100 yards to the side of transiting whales and should not cross in their path, and not pursue or surround them.

All whales and other marine mammals within the waters of the United States are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act. An action by an individual, regardless of their distance from a whale, causing the animal to change its behavior may constitute “harassment” potentially subjecting the individual to federal fines and penalties. Humpback whales, like blue whales and several other species of marine mammals along our coasts, are also protected under federal law by the Endangered Species Act and all federal violations are subject to criminal and/or civil prosecution.

It is a wonderful experience to enjoy these magnificent animals and celebrate their population increase after over 40 years of protection under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and other state and federal statutes. But let’s remember, these are wild animals of enormous proportions that could inadvertently crush a person with the slightest impact or miscue.

We urge the public to help protect the visiting whales by giving them the space they need to feed and by reporting whale harassment or injury to the NOAA Enforcement Hotline at 1-800-853-1964. For more information on marine wildlife viewing guidelines please visit us on the web at <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/protect/oceanetiquette.html> and <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/viewing.htm>

For more information please contact: Jim Milbury (562) 980-4006



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## Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

### Description

Humpbacks are the most familiar large whales – they are well studied, frequently photographed, and a main attraction of whale watching boats. Humpbacks can be easily identified by their long flippers which can be up to one-third the length of the body, and inspired their scientific name which means “big winged New Englander”. Humpbacks have a dorsal fin and a noticeable hump on their back as they arch to dive. They can be individually recognized by the pigmentation pattern on the underside of their flukes (tails) which they frequently raise when diving.

### Habitat and Distribution

Humpback whales are distributed worldwide, primarily along the coast and continental shelf. They migrate from summer feeding grounds in mid to high latitudes to winter mating and calving grounds in tropical and subtropical waters.

### Sounds

The most remarkable sound produced by humpback whales is the song made by males on the mating grounds to attract females and possibly to establish dominance among other males. This song is specific to the population and changes over time. Humpbacks also make a variety of other social sounds including upsweeps, grunts, moans, squeaks, wops, and grumbles.

### Feeding

Humpback whales feed alone or cooperatively on krill and small schooling fish such as herring, capelin, and sand lance.

### Threats

Current threats include entanglement in fishing gear, ship strikes, whale watch harassment and loss of habitat.

### Fun Fact

Humpbacks sometimes “bubble feed” blowing a ring of bubbles underwater to corral fish, and then dive through the middle to scoop them up!



Family: Balaenopteridae  
Population: < 50,000  
Length: 52 – 56 feet  
Weight: Up to 45 tons