

OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR MARINE MAMMAL WATCHING IN THE WIDER CARIBBEAN REGION (WCR)



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Group of Frasers Dolphins © Kiszka-Jeremy

The people of the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) depend greatly on coastal and marine resources for their economic, social and cultural well-being. One of the region's major economic activities-tourism-is dependent on these resources and, therefore, it is critical that it be developed and carried out in a responsible and sustainable manner. A growing, yet not fully realized component of tourism in the WCR is marine mammal watching.

The WCR is important for a great number of cetaceans (whales and dolphins), whether as a permanent habitat, a breeding ground or a migration corridor. Currently, at least thirty species of whales and dolphins have been identified in this area. The

presence and diversity of cetaceans in the region has led to the development of marine mammal watching, both on a commercial and recreational basis.

Marine mammal watching, in this context, is defined as viewing activities in the natural environment, of any cetacean species from land, sea or air. These best practice guidelines apply to all types of marine mammal watching, including dedicated, seasonal and opportunistic, commercial operators, and recreational vessels.

In 2000, the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife in the Wider Caribbean Region (SPAW) entered into force (<http://www.cep.unep.org/cartagena-convention/spaw-protocol/overview-of-the-spaw-protocol>).

This Protocol, one of three supplementing the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment in the Wider Caribbean Region (Cartagena Convention), is the only regional biodiversity legal agreement for the advancement of the conservation and protection of the marine environment in the Wider Caribbean Region.

The SPAW Protocol calls for the development and implementation of conservation, recovery or management programmes, as well as guidelines and criteria for the management of protected species. These guidelines were developed under the framework of the Marine Mammal Action Plan for the Conservation of Marine Mammals adopted by SPAW Contracting Parties.

OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

- Ensure the conservation of marine mammals and their habitats in the Wider Caribbean Region
- Ensure a precautionary approach to the development and management of marine mammal watching in the Region
- Minimise the impact of viewing activities on marine mammals and other species or ocean ecosystems
- Provide long-term benefits for the livelihood of local communities
- Promote local knowledge and understanding of marine mammals and the marine environment through training, education and dedicated research

The following management considerations and guidelines for marine mammal watching were developed for the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) in 2011 taking into account the existing national guidelines, decrees and regulations. However, while these guidelines are recommendations in WCR, different regulations can apply at a national level.



MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Assessment of the numbers, distribution and other characteristics of the target population/s before the implementation of tourism operations to establish the feasibility of the industry and a baseline for monitoring
- National licensing or permitting schemes to regulate:
 - ▷ The number, size and type of vessels
 - ▷ Standards of operation
 - ▷ Site specificity and species
 - ▷ Research and media
 - ▷ Training for operators
 - ▷ Sanctions for non-compliance, such schemes subject to change and improvement
 - ▷ National measures to regulate approaches
 - ▷ Frequency, length of time and type of encounters with marine mammals
 - ▷ Development of cooperative regional management provisions wherever appropriate
- Management measures, to include closed seasons, exclusion zones, and ‘no approach times’ to provide additional protection to habitats, populations, and individuals
- Where new marine mammal watching operations are evolving, start cautiously, moderating activity and adapting management until sufficient information on populations and species is available to guide further development
- Monitoring the effectiveness of management provisions and modifying them as required, in the consultation of stakeholders
- Establishment of an enforcement framework to ensure compliance with regulations
- Promote scientific and socio-economic research and monitoring, assessment of potential impacts on marine mammals, and collection and sharing of information by all stakeholders
- Dissemination of information and ongoing operator and naturalist training or accreditation programmes on the biology and behaviour of target species, local ecosystems, navigation, culture, best practice of marine mammal watching operations, and the management provisions in effect
- Supporting, protecting and empowering WCR communities’ participation and ownership of the marine mammal watching industry
- Set educational standards for the provision of accurate and informative material to marine mammal watch participants, to:
 - ▷ Develop an informed and environmentally responsible public
 - ▷ Encourage development of realistic expectations during encounters
 - ▷ Encourage the provision of naturalist guides on all boats
 - ▷ Encourage public participation in on-board programmes

GUIDELINES FOR WATCHING MARINE MAMMALS

Marine mammal watching activities can potentially have adverse impacts on marine mammal populations, including disruption of important behaviours, displacement from habitat, chronic stress and serious injury. Therefore, persons should:



Operate watercraft, and aircraft so as not to disrupt the normal movement or behaviour of marine mammals.



Stop watching a marine mammal at any sign of the animal becoming disturbed or alarmed.



Allow marine mammals to determine the nature, duration and proximity of watching and possible 'interactions'.

At all times:

- Do not touch the marine mammals
- Do not feed the marine mammals
- Do not make any loud or sudden noises
- Dedicated observer(s) should be on duty in addition to the captain of the vessel

In general:

- Do not carry out any activities that might condition marine mammals to approach watercraft
- Do not throw litter into the water
- Leave boat engine on and in idle, or drop sails, when watching marine mammals. Do not disperse or separate a group of marine mammals
- Watercraft should not chase, encircle, leap-frog, block the direction of travel of marine mammals or access to the open sea, or position itself in the middle of a group
- If dolphins approach a vessel to bow-ride or wake-ride, maintain a steady speed and avoid changes in course
- When departing from marine mammals, determine where the animals are relative to the watercraft to avoid collisions or coming too close to the animals, and increase speed gradually only after the animals are outside the no approach zone
- Watching marine mammals for more than 30 minutes, or 3 dive sequences with sperm whales, is discouraged. Any accidents or collisions with marine mammals should be documented and reported to relevant authorities

WATERCRAFTS

- Watercraft should meet appropriate safety standards.
- Watercrafts such as jet skis and all motorized personal watercraft), parasail, remotely operated craft, wing in ground effect craft, hovercraft, windsurfers, kite surfers should NOT be used.
- Use of aircraft and helicopters is discouraged, except in the case of permitted scientific research and media. Aircraft may not approach (in height or distance) within 500m of a marine mammal.

ANGLES AND DISTANCES OF APPROACH

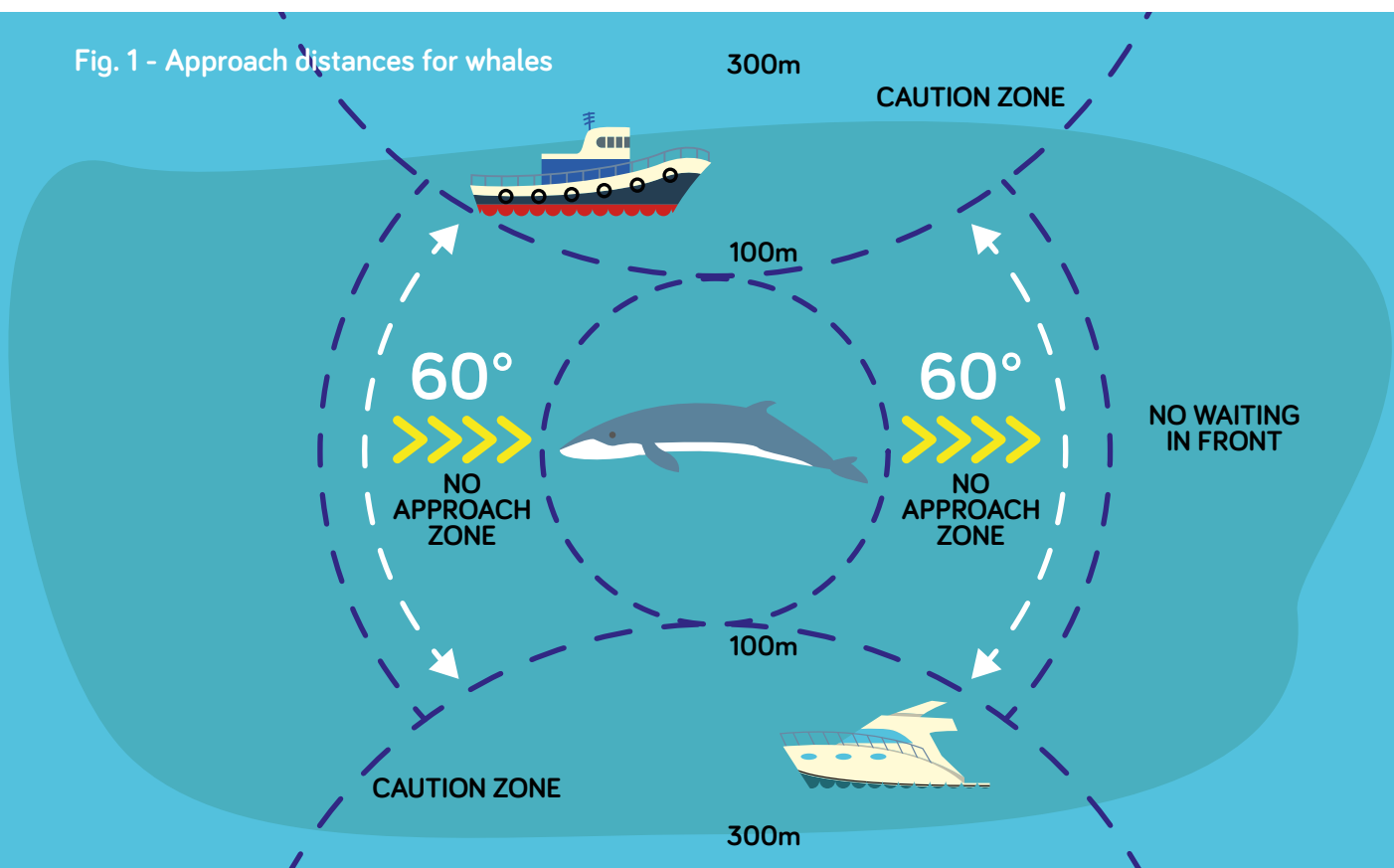
Approach

- Most appropriate method is approaching whale or dolphin from the side and slightly to the rear of the animal.
- Avoid approaches from head on or directly from behind. In the case of sperm whales, approach animals from the rear and slightly to the side.

Caution zone

- A caution zone is an area in which watercraft should proceed at a no-wake speed (6 knots or less).
- The caution zone is the area within 300m from a whale, 150m from a dolphin and 50m from a manatee (within 50m of a manatee, engines should be shut off).
- No more than 3 watercrafts should be in the caution zone of a marine mammal at a time. When there is more than one watercraft in the caution zone, operators should coordinate movements and maintain radio contact.
- Observe marine mammals at a speed not exceeding the speed of the slowest animal.

Fig. 1 - Approach distances for whales



No approach zone

- The no approach zone is the minimum distance to which a watercraft may approach a marine mammal.
- Engines should be in neutral, or sails dropped.
- Minimum approach distances for whales in the region range from 50-250m. Minimum approach distances for dolphins in the region range from 30-100m, including the area directly in front of and behind a pod. Conditions which may require greater distance would be mother-calf pairs.
- Minimum approach distance for manatees is 30m.

SWIMMING AND DIVING WITH MARINE MAMMALS IN THE WILD

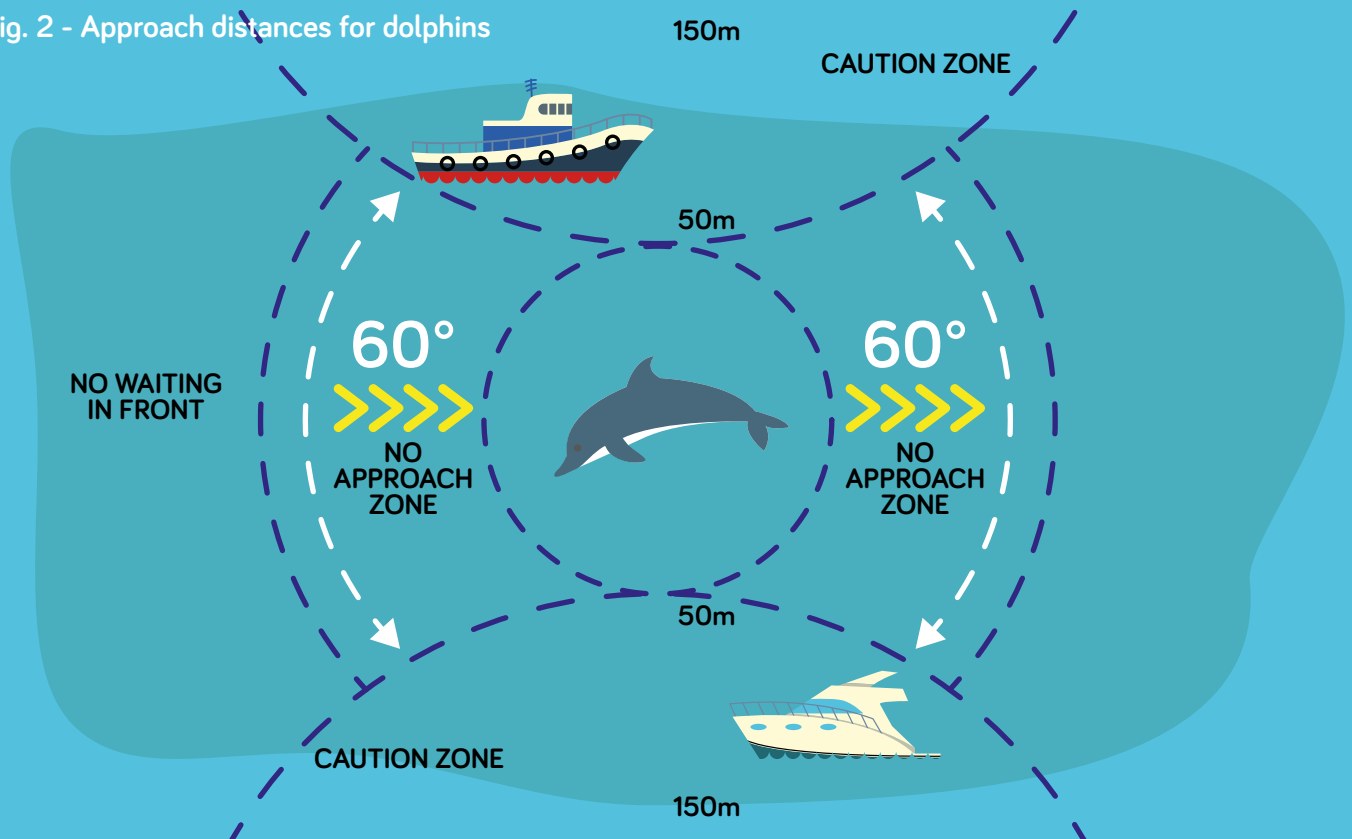
- Swimming with marine mammals may increase the potential for disturbance and displacement and puts people at risk.
- Swimming with the use of any underwater breathing apparatus should not be allowed.
- Underwater flash photography or lighted filming should not be allowed.
- Swimmers should not be allowed in the water with surface-active large whales.
- Swimming with mothers and calves should be discouraged.
- All persons in the water with marine mammals should be accompanied by an appropriately trained local guide.
- Limit the number of swimmers allowed in the water at any one time with a marine mammal or group of marine mammals.

Please visit the link below for additional details and information on whale watching regulations, guidelines and decrees in the region and bibliography:

▷ <http://www.car-spaw-rac.org/?Whale-Whatching-Guidelines,652>

▷ Report of the Regional Workshop on Marine Mammal Watching in the Wider Caribbean Region

Fig. 2 - Approach distances for dolphins





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