

**Too Close for Comfort:
Concern About the Growing Trend in Public Interactions with Wild Marine Mammals**

Trevor R. Spradlin, Lynne M. Barre, Jill K. Lewandowski and Eugene T. Nitta
Office of Protected Resources, NOAA/National Marine Fisheries Service

A recent study of whale watch activities worldwide has found that the business of viewing whales and dolphins in their natural habitat has grown rapidly over the past decade into a billion dollar (\$US) industry involving over 80 countries and territories and over 9 million participants (Hoyt 2001). The popularity of marine mammal viewing activities can result in conservation and socioeconomic benefits for the animals and local communities alike *if* they are conducted responsibly and with care. However, if viewing activities are not conducted appropriately, they can place marine mammals at significant risk of harassment, injury or death.

In 1988, a workshop sponsored by the Center for Marine Conservation and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) was held in Monterey, California to review and evaluate whale watching programs and management needs (CMC and NMFS 1988). Workshop participants included representatives from Federal government agencies, the scientific research community, commercial industry and conservation groups. Several recommendations were made to address concerns about the harassment of marine mammals during wildlife viewing activities including the development of regulations to restrict operating thrill craft near cetaceans, swimming and diving with the animals, and feeding cetaceans in the wild.

During the 13 years following the workshop, progress has been made to implement the workshop recommendations and to address additional concerns about inappropriate viewing of small cetaceans and pinnipeds that result in harassment¹ of the animals. For example, in the U.S., NMFS published regulations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act that prohibit:

- the negligent or intentional operation of an aircraft or vessel, or the doing of any other negligent or intentional act which results in disturbing or molesting a marine mammal
- feeding or attempting to feed a marine mammal in the wild
- approaching humpback whales in Hawaii and Alaska waters closer than 100 yards (91.4 m)
- approaching North Atlantic right whales closer than 500 yards (457 m)

NMFS has also developed viewing guidelines and outreach materials to educate the public and commercial operators how to observe wild marine mammals without causing harassment.

¹Under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), it is illegal to “harass” marine mammals in U.S. waters. The MMPA defines the term “harassment” as: “any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which – (1) has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild, (Level A harassment), or (2) has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering (Level B harassment).”

Nevertheless, over the past decade, there has been an alarming shift from passive viewing of marine mammals at a safe distance to a more close up and interactive approach. This shift has occurred worldwide with commercial operators as well as with the public at large. The Internet, print and broadcast media are flooded with advertisements and images of close interactions between humans and marine mammals. People are paying hundreds or thousands of dollars (\$US) to swim with, touch or feed wild marine mammals.

Many of these activities are being conducted in important habitats that the animals use for resting, breeding, calving, nursing, feeding and/or for shelter. Some of the species that are the focus of these interactions are endangered or threatened. For example, commercial tours offer the public the chance to: swim with humpback whale cow/calf pairs in their breeding/nursery habitat in the Caribbean; pet gray whales in their breeding/nursery habitat in Baja, Mexico; pet and “cuddle” harp seal pups on ice flows in Canada; walk amongst seals or sea lions in their rookeries in California and the Galapagos Islands; swim with dolphins in their resting or feeding areas in Hawaii, Florida, New Zealand, the Bahamas and Japan; swim with manatees in Florida and Belize; and feed wild dolphins in Australia.

A growing number of marine mammal biologists, federal and state wildlife officials and wildlife interest groups have become increasingly concerned that marine mammals are being harassed and placed at risk by activities that encourage interactions with the animals and/or are conducted in contradiction to established responsible wildlife viewing guidelines and regulations. This has led to recent research efforts to monitor and evaluate the impacts of people closely approaching, swimming, touching and feeding marine mammals. Research conducted to date suggests that marine mammals are at risk of being disturbed (“harassed”), displaced and/or injured by such close interactions. Researchers are reporting boat strikes, disturbance of vital behaviors and social groups, separation of mothers and young, abandonment of resting areas, and habituation to humans (for some examples, please see Kovacs and Innes 1990, Kruse 1991, Wells and Scott 1997, Samuels and Bejder 1998, Bejder *et al.* 1999, Colborn 1999, Constantine 1999, Cope *et al.* 1999, Mann *et al.* 2000, Samuels *et al.* 2000, Boren *et al.* 2001, Constantine 2001, Nowacek *et al.* 2001).

There are also substantial public safety concerns regarding human interactions with marine mammals that cannot be ignored. Many people have been bitten or otherwise injured while trying to closely approach, feed, swim with, touch or interact with wild cetaceans or pinnipeds (see Webb 1978, NMFS 1994, Wilson 1994, Orams *et al.* 1996, Seideman 1997, Christie 1998, Samuels and Bejder 1998, Samuels *et al.* 2000). Many members of the Society are familiar with the now infamous incident whereby a woman was bitten and pulled underwater by a pilot whale when she closely approached and petted the animal (Shane *et al.* 1993). In another case, a dolphin killed a swimmer who was harassing the animal (Santos 1997). When wild marine mammals have injured people, they have been labeled “nuisance animals,” and in some cases individuals have called for the animals to be removed from the wild or euthanized.

The growing body of evidence that close interactions are harmful is not surprising given that they are contrary to established wildlife viewing practices. For decades, our colleagues in the

terrestrial wildlife field have been successful in gaining public acceptance for common sense wildlife viewing practices, *i.e.*, look but don't touch or disturb wild animals; use binoculars or telephoto lenses for a close up view; never feed wildlife ("A fed animal is a dead animal" is a slogan used by Canada's National Park system); stay on the trails; leave habitat better than you found it (see Duda 1995, Oberbillig 2000). The marine mammal field is overdue in applying these same values to marine species and ecosystems.

As supporters of marine mammal conservation, we can and should promote better wildlife viewing practices. Scientists, in particular, are in a unique position to educate the public about these concerns because of their intimate knowledge of the animals. Those who work closely with live marine mammals should carefully explain the difference between their research activities and how the public should behave around the animals in the wild. For example, a field biologist who enters the water near cetaceans to identify individuals and determine gender should be cautious of how their research is conveyed to the public. When presenting data, working with a film crew, or talking to the media, the field biologist should ensure that their work does not inadvertently encourage the public to pursue similar interactions that can be harmful to the animals, especially when conducted by inexperienced people. In addition, scientists involved in international research projects should be conscious of their local audience when giving presentations or talking to the media. For example, a researcher studying the effects of provisioning wild dolphins should mention that this activity is illegal in the U.S. when presenting information to a U.S. audience.

Unfortunately, some researchers and conservation groups have sent mixed messages to the public about viewing wild marine mammals. Some have published popular books and articles that have encouraged the public's desire to touch and swim with the animals. It's one thing for a "New Age" advocate to publish a book on swimming with whales and dolphins; it's quite another for an established scientist or organization to do the same. It is equally disconcerting to see that others have lent their names and reputations to "eco-tourism" ventures that offer close interactions with the animals. Some of these individuals or groups protest such activities in the U.S. and yet, surprisingly, are endorsing or participating in the very same activities abroad.

One justification often used by those who promote interactive viewing in countries that hunt marine mammals is that it is "better to interact with the animals than to have them be killed." It is unclear why it has to be an "Either/Or" situation. Isn't it even better to view the animals in a manner that has little or no impact on them at all? There are numerous examples worldwide of economically successful viewing operations that involve observing marine mammals passively and at a safe distance *without* interaction, and that provide participants with an educational and rewarding experience.

There is no denying that viewing marine mammals in the wild is an important way to foster public support for conservation. Nevertheless, viewing activities need to be done responsibly to ensure the impacts are minimal and do not compromise the health and welfare of the animals. In

an era where nature programs on our televisions glorify “crocodile hunters” and other individuals who disturb or feed wildlife under the guise of “environmental education,” it’s no wonder the public is tempted to interact with wild animals. Marine mammals are not safe from this attention and we, as marine mammal scientists and conservationists, have a responsibility to promote safe and appropriate viewing practices for the animals in the wild. The zoo and aquarium industry needs to share this responsibility, especially the facilities that offer “interactive” programs. People who visit such facilities need to learn the differences between interacting with animals in human care vs. animals in the wild, and why interactions with wild animals are inappropriate and potentially dangerous. All serious marine mammal scientists and conservationists should make a concerted effort to encourage passive viewing of marine mammals at a safe distance without engaging in direct interactions. It is our responsibility to help ensure that our actions and messages do not encourage the public to get too close for comfort to marine mammals in the wild.

Note: The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent NMFS policy or the Society for Marine Mammalogy. For information on NMFS regulations and guidelines for viewing wild marine mammals, please visit:

www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/MMWatch/MMViewing.html

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