



Whale Watching Voluntary Code of Ethics

A population of humpback whales migrates from the cold waters of Iceland and Southern Greenland to the Silver Banks and potentially the Turks Bank, where they mate and give birth each winter. During this period and after giving birth, the whales travel around on the Turks, Caicos and Muchoir Banks. The presence of aggregations of humpback whales close to the Turks and Caicos Islands has given rise to opportunities for whale watching.

The advantages of whale watching are wide: it provides an opportunity to teach people to appreciate and understand the value of whales and other cetaceans; it fosters research; it contributes to the conservation of the animals; and helps ensure the economic security of local communities which serve as protectors of marine habitat. It is estimated that from December to April, during the whale migration, Salt Cay and Grand Turk receive 75% of their tourists and operators earn up 70% of their annual income. If conducted appropriately and ethically, whale watching excursions can provide sustainable livelihoods for water sports small business owners throughout the Turks and Caicos Islands.

With increased tourism pressures on whale populations, guidelines governing human/whale interaction are critical in order to protect both human and whale interests.

In view of the above, the DECR would like to encourage charter and water sports operators, tourism enterprises and the general public to comply with the following voluntary code of ethics¹ for whale watching:

1. No more than 20 persons will be on board a whale watching vessel at any time.
2. When a whale is spotted, the vessel's engines shall be placed in neutral or shall be allowed to idle for a short period before turning it off.
3. Noise levels are to be kept to a minimum. No horns, whistles or racing of motors will be permitted.
4. Passengers are to be instructed to remain calm and quiet.
5. Boats should not approach within 50 metres of a whale. This also applies to swimmers in the water. All interaction must be due to whale initiation. Under no circumstances, should boats or swimmers chase after a whale that has indicated it is not interested in interaction.
6. Do not allow your vessel to cause the whale to change direction or course. Disturbance can drive whales away from critical habitats.
7. Never allow a boat or a swimmer to come between a mother and calf. Disruption of parental care may reduce a calf's chance of survival and may incite aggression by the mother.

¹ In compliance with all COVID-19 Regulations as stipulated by the Ministry of Health



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8. Snorkelers should not engage in free diving near whales, as this can be perceived as aggressive by whales.
9. Vessels should approach whales from a direction parallel and slightly to the rear, or position the vessel at least 300 metres ahead of the whale and allow it to approach you. Never approach a whale head-on or directly from the rear.
10. Within 300 metres of a whale, move at a constant slow speed, no faster than the slowest whale or at idle, no wake speed.
11. Avoid sudden or repeated changes in speed or direction. Changes in speed or direction may alarm whales. If you need to constantly change direction, they are trying to avoid you. Leave them alone.
12. Never approach whales closer than 50 metres. If whales approach within 50 metres of the vessel, slowly steer away or place the engines in neutral and let the whales come to you. Do not engage the prop within 100 metres and do not chase the whales when they leave.
13. Never box in whales, cut off their path and/or prevent them from leaving, particularly when more than one vessel is present.
14. Do not attempt to approach mothers with young calves. A whale with a young calf may protect her calf aggressively if she feels threatened.
15. When leaving, move off slowly at idle, no wake speed until at least 300 metres from the closest whale before picking up speed.
16. No more than three vessels should attempt to watch a whale or group of whales at one time. If several boats are in the area, limit your time to ensure that others get an opportunity to see the whales.
17. When approaching an area where other vessels are whale watching, establish contact by VHF radio and ensure that all operators are aware of whale watching guidelines.
18. Vessels not complying with this code of ethics should be reported to DECR at 338-4170.