

IceWhale's Code of Conduct for Responsible Whale Watching - Operators Manual -

We have limited understanding of cetacean¹ behaviour, especially of human cetacean interaction. With the increasing popularity of whale watching operations questions have arisen regarding the impact it could have on cetacean. Currently there is limited regulation and mechanisms in place to monitor the whale watching operations in Iceland, especially from an animal welfare point of view. IceWhale therefore initiated the development of this code of conduct for responsible whale watching. During its formulation staff involved in whale watching and international experts in the field assisted us. It is also based on previous work by NGO's, guidelines, codes of conduct, and general rules from whale watching operations around the world.

With this code of conduct we aim to:

- Minimise impact on cetacean in the future and ensure the sustainability of whale watching operations in Iceland.
- Ensure the best possible encounters, both for animal welfare and passenger enjoyment.
- Increase development, understanding and awareness of appropriate practices when watching cetacean.

We would like to point out that this code of conduct is general and in fact the minimum operational standards for IceWhale members. The diagram and its instructions are published on IceWhale's webpage for guests to better understand the constraints of the operations. This document is however the operator's manual meant for staff involved in whale watching to increase their understanding of their working environment. IceWhale expects members to participate in assessing the value of this newly created code of conduct. In the future it will be adjusted to maintain its relevance, as better understanding of human-cetacean interaction emerges. In addition to this code of conduct each operator is encouraged to develop and display their own operational standards; specific to such things as the environment within, and species with which they operate.

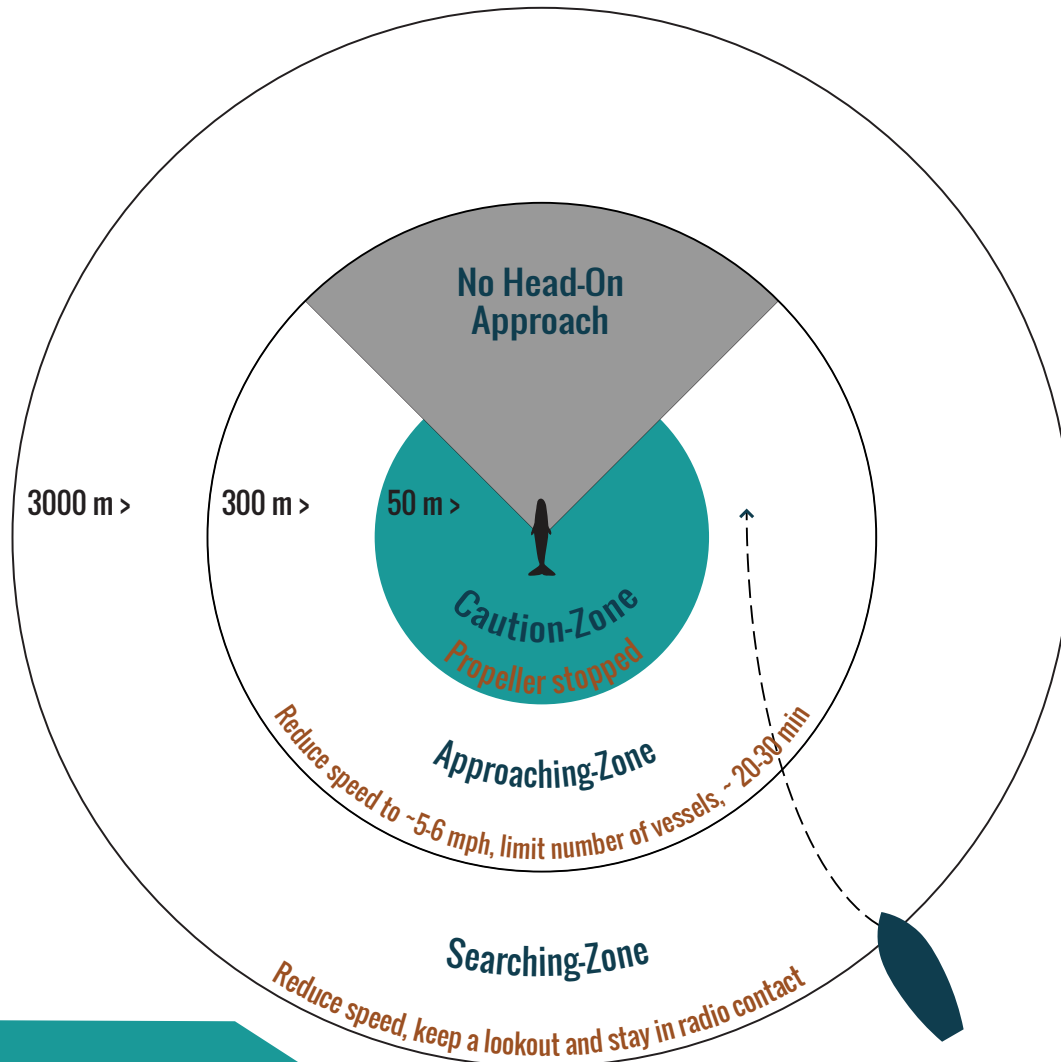
We would also like to stress that this is a code of conduct and therefore constitutes neither laws nor rules. Out at sea there are many variables to consider, such as: weather; cetacean numbers and abundance; how much prey is in the area; the number and nature of other vessels nearby; if there are calves present; and so on, and so forth. With experience captains, and naturalists, become more capable of assessing cetacean behaviour and are therefore best suited to decide if it is possible, and how to approach the cetacean. We therefore suggest that staff involved in whale watching think about this code of conduct and implement it whenever possible. Ultimately though it is up to them to decide on the appropriate procedures and actions.

¹ Used as a synonym for whales, dolphins and porpoises

Code of Conduct for responsible whale watching

We have to remember that these are wild animals and to enjoy them for the future we need to show them patience and respect. We will try to get you close but how close we get is always on the animal's terms as we aim to minimise disturbance.

This is a **Code of Conduct** we aim to abide by, however, there are many variables to consider when out at sea, such as the weather, number of whales, prey availability, if there are calves present, animal behaviour and so on and so forth.



Searching-Zone (3000m >)

Keep a dedicated lookout and stay in radio contact with other vessels (approaching and departing).

Avoid making sudden or excessive noises and disturbances.

Avoid sudden speed or course changes (approaching and departing).

Continuously assess cetacean behaviour during interactions, and avoid repeated attempts to interact with animals that are showing signs of distress.

Approaching-Zone (300m >)

Aim at maintaining a distance of 300 m at the beginning of the encounter, and gradually get closer with time.

Stop the main propeller (max speed ~5-6 mph). If the cetacean is travelling fast you can speed up a little (up to ~8 mph) but not directly towards the animal.

Avoid following behind cetacean and never deliberately approach directly in front. Vessel movements should be parallel to them, approaching cautiously at an oblique angle (from behind).

Don't move closer if there is another boat in the approaching zone, unless the other boat gives way or signals that it is safe to approach.

Take turns if there are more boats in the area, preferably each boat shouldn't spend more than 20-30 minutes with the same cetacean.

Never (deliberately) sail through pods of concentrated cetacean.

Keep to a steady speed if dolphins approach the vessel and start bow-riding, or else come slowly to a stop and let them pass.

Do not attempt to encourage dolphins to bow-ride.

Ensure that the vessel does not disturb nesting or resting birds.

Caution-Zone (50m >)

When possible, stop the propeller if any cetacean approach the vessel and do not re-engage propulsion until all cetacean are observed to be well clear of your vessel.

Do not touch, swim with or feed cetacean.

REPORT A VIOLATION

If you think that this Code of Conduct has not been fulfilled please discuss it with the crew and/or contact the IceWhale office (e-mail info@icewhale.is)

Searching-Zone (3000m >):

This is the area of the actual search for the cetacean. In some locations the search starts right after leaving the port whereas in other locations some sailing is required to reach the cetacean grounds. Therefore it's important to adjust the distances to the area in which you operate. Naturalist(s), crewmembers and even guests take part in the search and when any cetacean have been spotted it's important to follow this code of conduct on how to approach and behave in the vicinity of the animals.

- **Keep a dedicated lookout and stay in radio contact with other vessels (approaching and departing).**

We never know where or when the cetacean may come to the surface and therefore it's important to always be prepared for their appearance.

- **Avoid making sudden or excessive noises and disturbances.**

Recent studies suggest that noise pollution may cause harm to cetacean directly, e.g. by damaging their hearing. More commonly it appears that excessive or prolonged noise pollution can cause behavioural changes that interfere with their health and survival.

- **Avoid sudden speed or course changes (approaching and departing).**

Just as we try to interpret cetacean behaviour we should be as predictable as possible so they may also interpret our behaviour. The vessels should therefore be manoeuvred softly and as predictably as possible. This is not only better for the cetacean and other wildlife but also the engines and gearboxes. It also minimises pollution and increases passenger safety.

- **Continuously assess cetacean behaviour during interactions, and avoid repeated attempts to interact with animals that are showing signs of distress.**

A responsible encounter is always on the animal's terms. We still have a lot to learn about cetacean behaviour, but disturbance by vessels is believed to cause: disruption to normal animal behaviour (e.g. when feeding, migrating, resting); avoidance of important habitats (e.g. feeding, resting and mating areas); increased stress; injury; increased mortality; and even reduced breeding success (less births or less births that survive to adulthood).

Therefore it's important to continuously keep an eye out for what appears to be an aggressive or negatively disturbed behaviour (in particular, tail slapping or loud trumpet blows, but other signs of disturbances include: obvious or repeated attempts to move away from the vessel; regular changes in direction or speed of swimming; hasty dives; changes in breathing patterns; and increased times spent diving compared to time spent at the surface) and to swiftly take appropriate action.

Approaching-Zone (300m >):

This is the area where we have the chance to approach the cetacean and gain their trust. Given the nature of our operations, obviously the main objective is to get as close as possible, but to still be far enough away so that our presence does not disrupt natural behaviour. It's important to keep in mind that some species and/or animals are more elusive than others, and so the actual distance should wherever possible be adjusted according to the species being approached. It's also important to take account of the local geography to avoid the possibility of trapping cetacean in or crossing their path.

- **Aim at maintaining a distance of 300 m at the beginning of the encounter, and gradually get closer with time.**

This gives the captain the chance to assess the cetacean behaviour and also builds up excitement amongst passengers that gradually get a better view. Show particular care and keep more of a distance in rough sea conditions, when cetacean are feeding (e.g. lunge feeding, fast surfacing, dolphins breaching in a circular pattern, and flocks of birds) or resting (usually travelling slowly and surfacing in the same direction or logging). If it seems to be avoiding the vessel then either increase the distance between the vessel and the cetacean or move on and leave it alone. Most importantly when unsure about the appropriate action always keep more of a distance between you and the cetacean.

- **Stop the main propeller (max speed ≈5-6 mph). If the cetacean is travelling fast you can speed up a little (up to ≈8 mph) but not directly towards the animal.**

Cetacean can change direction, speed, and behaviour rapidly and these factors could lead to problems if you approach too quickly.

- **Avoid following behind cetacean and never deliberately approach directly in front. Vessel movements should be parallel to them, approaching cautiously at an oblique angle (from behind).**

Cetacean have none, or limited view directly in front or behind and could therefore be startled by an encounter in those areas. The behaviour described above is therefore believed to be the safest way to approach cetacean. It also gives passengers the best view of the animal(s). If the cetacean is a sperm whale it is thought best to approach from behind.

- **Don't move closer if there is another boat in the approaching zone, unless the other boat gives way or signals that it is safe to approach.**

The crew of the first vessel to spot the cetacean and approach it has had more time to assess its behaviour and could therefore advise any following vessel(s) on how best to move in. Therefore it's important to communicate with other vessels in the area and to coordinate actions, equally within and between companies. Nearby fishing or other vessels could also have valuable information on the cetacean.

- **Take turns if there are more boats in the area, preferably each boat shouldn't spend more than 20-30 minutes with the same cetacean.**

To limit disturbance to cetacean it's recommended to avoid lengthy encounters

especially when more than one vessel is in the area (of course we aim to keep the number of vessels in close proximity to cetacean as low as possible to limit the chances of vessels 'boxing-in' cetacean or cutting off travel routes). A suggested maximum time around each cetacean or cetacean group is one hour. If signs of disturbance occur then retreat immediately but slowly and quietly, and notify any other vessels in the area. This will reduce the cumulative impact on the cetacean, and demonstrate consideration to other viewers, the environment and above all the cetacean being watched.

- **Never (deliberately) sail through pods of concentrated cetacean.**

Apart from the inherent danger of close encounters, this could separate or scatter the cetacean.

- **Keep to a steady speed if dolphins approach the vessel and start bow-riding, or else come slowly to a stop and let them pass.**

If dolphins choose to come under the boat of their own free will do not change speed. This will allow them to play in the wave from the bow. When this occurs, it is perfectly fine to enjoy the experience, and to encourage passengers to watch and enjoy the dolphins playing by or under the bow of the boat.

- **Do not attempt to encourage dolphins to bow-ride.**

It is not certain that all dolphins will want to bow-ride as this close proximity could cause unnecessary stress.

- **Ensure that the vessel does not disturb nesting or resting birds.**

Seabirds that are seen on the surface of the ocean around colonies may be resting, foraging, feeding, courting or preening. These are all critical activities that the presence of any vessel(s) may disrupt. If birds are repeatedly forced to take flight, and are interrupted in their activities it could have a detrimental impact on them.

Caution-Zone (50m >):

This is “the area of cetacean choice”, and no intentional approach by any vessel should be made within this zone, without special care. The distance from the vessel to the animal should therefore depend on whether or not the cetacean chooses to approach of its own accord. The reason for this particular care is to avoid distressing or colliding with any cetacean, given that their behaviour can be unpredictable. Inevitably, close approaches may not happen on every occasion, but the most memorable encounters for passengers are certainly those that are natural. The distance should also take into account: the species being watched; the number of cetacean; and number and size of vessels nearby. Weather factors and the animals’ behaviour should also be taken into consideration. The general rule of thumb is: the larger the animal(s) or the vessel(s) involved the distance of the encounter should be greater and the rougher weather the greater distance.

Note: Always account for the fact that the boat continues to move even when you have shut your engine off. Should you accidentally approach too close withdraw at a constant, slow, no-wake speed.

- **When possible, stop the propeller if any cetacean approach the vessel and do not re-engage propulsion until all cetacean are observed to be well clear of your vessel.**

Attempting to move the vessel while the cetacean is under or around it could be dangerous for you and/or the cetacean. Therefore it’s important to allow them to completely control the interaction in this zone and the vessel must be operated with due caution. Starting the propellers in close proximity to any animal may startle it and could cause an inadvertent reaction. Also please keep in mind that in some circumstances it might be better to keep the propeller running to avoid drifting.

- **Do not touch, swim with or feed cetacean.**

To maintain the encounter as natural as possible, and to follow safety standards, it’s important not to engage in a closer than necessary encounter. Touching is for example believed to open up the possibility of disease transmission and could startle the cetacean. A startled cetacean is also more likely to injure itself and others. Since cetacean behaviour is not thoroughly understood experts advise that it is best to observe and appreciate them without entering the water. Last but not least cetacean are capable of finding their own food, we should ensure that this continues without creating any reliance on human intervention.

CONTACT NUMBERS

This Code of Conduct

For more information on this code of conduct or laws pertaining to cetacean, contact the IceWhale office (e-mail info@icewhale.is). Please contact also if you have suggestions or comments regarding the code of conduct in whole, or parts of it.

Potential Violations

Disrespect of this code of conduct or any activity that appears to be an intentional or negligent action leading to collision or harassment of cetacean should be reported to the IceWhale office (e-mail info@icewhale.is).

Ship Strikes

Any accidents or collisions with cetacean should be documented immediately and reported to the relevant/local police department (tel. 112) and to the [IWC ship strike database](#). It's also helpful to report to the IceWhale office (e-mail info@icewhale.is).

Entangled Cetacean

Any sighting of an entangled cetacean should be reported to the relevant/local police department (tel. 112). It's also helpful to report to the IceWhale office (e-mail info@icewhale.is). If possible, vessels should stand-by and keep the animal(s) in sight until help arrives or arrange for another vessel to maintain contact with it.

Dead Cetacean

Any sighting of any injured or dead cetacean should be reported. If possible include location, condition of the animal (e.g. live/dead/wounded), the type and number of animals (if the type of analysis is not possible, it is useful to obtain information on size and whether it's a toothed whale or baleen whale). Report to the relevant/local police department (tel. 112). It's also helpful to report to the IceWhale office (e-mail info@icewhale.is).

FURTHER READING

IceWhale's office has collected interesting publications about cetacean and whale watching in Iceland. These documents are available through IceWhale's office (e-mail info@icewhale.is). Below is also a list of a few publications about code of conducts and responsible whale watching:

- [AN ANALYSIS OF WHALEWATCHING CODES OF CONDUCT](#) (2004), by Brian Garrod and David A. Fennell.
- [A REVIEW OF WHALE WATCH GUIDELINES AND REGULATIONS AROUND THE WORLD](#) (VERSION 2009), collected by Carole Carlson.
- [WHALE WATCHING IN ICELAND: AN ASSESSMENT OF WHALE WATCHING ACTIVITIES ON SKJÁLFANDI BAY](#) (2012), by Sara Marie Martin.
- [REPORT OF THE INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP ON GUIDING PRINCIPLES DEVELOPMENT](#) (2013), by Carole Carlson, Greg Kaufman, Fabian Ritter, Naomi Rose.
- [ESTIMATING CUMULATIVE EXPOSURE OF WILDLIFE TO NON-LETHAL DISTURBANCE USING SPATIALLY EXPLICIT CAPTURE-RECAPTURE MODELS](#) (2014), by Fredrik Christiansen, Chiara G. Bertulli, Marianne H. Rasmussen and David Lusseau.