

How to View Marine Mammals Responsibly

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Blue whale off Los Angeles, California (Photograph by Maddalena Bearzi under NOAA permit)

The waters off Southern California have been the platform for my field research on whales, dolphins, and other marine mammals for almost two decades. Lately, however, something has changed in the occurrence of these animals in my ocean “backyard.” I have never seen such a diversity and abundance of cetaceans as in recent times.

In the last few years, blue whales, fin whales, minke whales, sperm whales, humpback whales, and several species of dolphins seemed to have chosen these waters as their provisional “home” and favorite feeding grounds. The 2013-2014 season has brought more gray whale sightings than ever off Los Angeles, with a record number of 370 whales in December 2013. This number doubled the sightings of the previous year during the same time period. This year, killer whales were observed feeding just off the coastline of L.A. From my research boat, I have recorded how fin whales, minkes, and the critically endangered blue whales have elected this area as banquets for plentiful meals.

My study area is the Southern California Bight, which includes coastal Southern California, the Channel Islands, and surrounding waters. It is frequented by one of the largest populations of marine mammals in the world: up to 30 different species! Some of these species are here year-round, like bottlenose dolphins, which are the main focus of my research off Los Angeles and are easily visible from shore, long- and short-beaked common dolphins, California sea lions, and harbor seals. Most of the other species are sighted occasionally.

The reason behind this recent record of cetaceans off Southern California is not due to a population boom. It is likely a combination of different factors that contribute to this shift in whale and dolphin presence, including changes in oceanographic conditions and, consequently, availability of prey.

For gray whales, which migrate 12,000 miles each year from Arctic waters in the north to the shallow lagoons and bays of Baja California in the south, the jump in sightings may be due to potential changes in migratory routes and the fact that whale watchers, including those from shore, benefited from better visibility due to exceptionally clear sky and little rainfall of the last year. For killer whales, their presence off Southern California might be related to changes in their diet, which includes common dolphins, of which schools can reach thousands of individuals in SoCal waters.

Whatever the factors for this richness in marine mammals might be, the incredible presence of cetaceans is, of course, drawing much public attention. As humpback whales, fin whales, blue whales, and other species frequent this area in search of food, people are taking to the water to see them first-hand. It seems Californians want to know more about the magnificent animals living in their local waters. This is a good thing because a better knowledge of these creatures may translate to better protection of these species and the environment in which they live.

Unfortunately though, many people don't know that these whales are protected and that getting too close can potentially cause harm to them.

Whales and dolphins are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and boaters need to pay careful attention when approaching them. It's a violation of federal law to harass or harm them and penalties can include up to one-year imprisonment and fines of up to \$20,000. During my research at sea, I have seen a drastic increase in boat traffic near the feeding grounds of these animals. I have seen jet skis literally running over whales and recreational boats moving so close to these animals as to almost touch them.

The intentions, I am sure, are all good but the consequences for these animals can be serious, even if this is not necessarily something we can see on the spot while perched on the deck of a boat. Humans can choose to be respectful of other creatures and their habitats and by learning more about these remarkable animals (and observing them from a distance), we can all help assure their future and well-being.

Be Involved

Recently, I've grown increasingly worried about these marine creatures living in my study area and the potential negative effect of our human impact. Through my line of work at Ocean Conservation Society, I always try to inspire people to respect these (and other) animals and I make every possible effort to raise public awareness about their status. Because of the recent concern of whale and dolphin harassment off Southern California, OCS initiated the Be Whale Aware campaign to promote awareness in the boating and watersports communities. To get more information, download the free pocket-sized guides, or to get involved, click [here](#).

Here are some other ways you can actively help (for Southern California):

To report incidents of harassment of marine mammals: National Marine Fisheries Service 24-hour hotline: (800) 853 - 1964. Boaters can use VHF channel 16 to contact local authorities.

To report stranded animals: Keep your distance and call NMFS Southwest Regional Office: (562) 980 - 3230.

To report injured, entangled, or ship-struck whales: 24/7 WET hotline: (877) SOS - WHALE / (877) 767 - 9425.

Maddalena Bearzi has studied the ecology and conservation of marine mammals for over twenty-five years. She is President and Co-founder of the [Ocean Conservation Society](#), and Co-author of [Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins](#) (Harvard University Press, 2008). She also works as a photo-journalist and blogger for several publications. Her most recent book is [Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist](#) (Chicago University Press, 2012).

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MEET THE AUTHOR

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