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SCIENCE

SEPTEMBER 17, 2015

UPDATE: Humpback whale breaches on kayakers

by Christopher Pilny

There are certainly some inherent risks when kayaking amongst a pod of humpback whales. Getting sprayed by a blowhole, being picked up out of the water by a whale coming up for air: But never do you imagine a whale coming out of the water breaching right on top of you. That's the stuff of nightmares, right? Or Captain Ahab's crew in *Moby Dick* (though, that was a sperm whale)?

But for two kayakers in California last week, it neither nightmare or fiction: It was simply a reality.

While paddling along gently in Monterey Bay, two people in a tandem kayak had a humpback whale breach on top of them.

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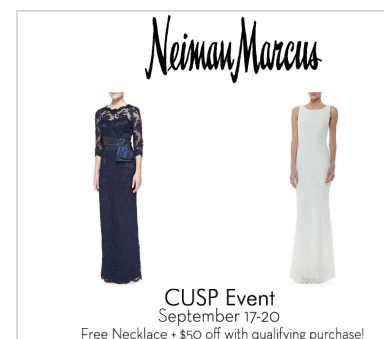
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Don't worry, they were ok, according to [some sources](http://www.someecards.com/videos/wtf/whale-flop-humpback-kayak/) (<http://www.someecards.com/videos/wtf/whale-flop-humpback-kayak/>), but still...WTF?!

The skeptic in us said, "Well, ok. This must have just been a crazy, one-in-a-million coincidence. Certainly this whale didn't mean to breach on top of them." But then...we found this video.



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And this one, which isn't a humpback, it's a southern right whale, but still...

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Ok, so what's going on, here?

As Katie Couric mentioned in the above video, officials were investigating whether or not the couple had been "harassing" the whale by being too close to it. So that got us wondering: Could the humpback breaching on the kayak have been on purpose?

Seeking an answer, we reached out to Dr. Maddalena Bearzi, cetologist and president of the [Ocean Conservation Society](http://www.oceanconservation.org/education/be-whale-aware/index.html) (<http://www.oceanconservation.org/education/be-whale-aware/index.html>), who is particularly interested in the growing problem of whale watchers influencing whale and dolphin (cetaceans) behavior.

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"Harassment [of cetaceans] is becoming a huge problem worldwide, particularly in areas where whale watching is popular--like Hawaii, California, and Mexico. These animals feed or breed in these areas, and those are very delicate moments. If you get too close to them--harass them--you can distract these behaviors."

Breaching, she explained, can be a result of this disturbance. While it's not exactly certain why whales breach, the predominant theory is that it's a non-acoustic form of communication--either between the whales or other aquatic species. The whale in the video, she said, may be reacting to the kayakers being so close, but there's no way of being certain.

"I think these animals can be a lot like humans. They have emotions like we do. We can be really nice, but if somebody bothers us, we can be really aggressive. Whales and dolphins have ways of letting people know they're tired of them. Whales may bump into boats, or dolphins may do the same, or slap the water with their tails. All ways of them saying, 'I'm tired of you!'"

The best way to avoid any problems like this in the future, she explained, is to maintain your distance from cetaceans. The [Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972](http://www.oceanconservation.org/education/be-whale-aware/be-whale-aware-pdf/OCS-Be-Whale-Aware-Swimmers-Guide.pdf) (<http://www.oceanconservation.org/education/be-whale-aware/be-whale-aware-pdf/OCS-Be-Whale-Aware-Swimmers-Guide.pdf>) requires that individuals must attempt to remain 100 yards (300 feet) from whales and dolphins at all times. If not possible, "do not chase them, move into their path or between them." T

Bearzi is concerned, though, that even with these restrictions, whale and human accidents will continue to happen more frequently.

"Hopefully no one will die," she said, "because these animals can weigh up to 40 tons."

For a full list of recommendations for safely viewing whales and dolphins, check out the [Ocean Conservation pocket guide](http://www.oceanconservation.org/education/be-whale-aware/be-whale-aware-pdf/OCS-Be-Whale-Aware-Swimmers-Guide.pdf) (<http://www.oceanconservation.org/education/be-whale-aware/be-whale-aware-pdf/OCS-Be-Whale-Aware-Swimmers-Guide.pdf>). You can also read an article Dr. Bearzi had published on the topic on [National Geographic](http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2014/04/24/how-to-view-marine-mammals-responsibly/) (<http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2014/04/24/how-to-view-marine-mammals-responsibly/>).

Feature Image: Sanctuary Cruises

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