

WDFW cautions boat owners to steer clear of orca whales

Local News

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OLYMPIA — With summer approaching, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is reminding recreational boaters to give orca whales and other marine mammals a wide berth.

State law requires boaters to stay at least 100 yards away from southern resident orca whales. Boaters who unexpectedly come into closer proximity to an orca are required to stop immediately and allow the whales to pass.

These and other state regulations apply to a variety of small watercraft, including tour boats, private powerboats, sailboats, kayaks, canoes and personal floatation devices.

Federal law also includes broad restrictions against disturbing or harassing any marine mammal, said Mike Cenci, WDFW's deputy chief of enforcement.

"Boaters have a responsibility to keep their distance from these amazing animals," Cenci said. "Human disturbances, including boat traffic, can interfere with their ability to feed, communicate with one another and care for their young."

Cenci noted that WDFW has issued 10 citations and dozens of warnings to recreational boaters since 2008, when the Legislature approved the state law regulating boating activity around orca whales.

Violating the state law can result in a fine of up to \$1,025. The maximum fine under federal law is \$10,000.

The southern resident orca population, which currently includes about 90 whales, is classified as "endangered" by both the State of Washington and the federal government.

Those animals, which mostly travel the waters of northern Puget Sound, account for the majority of orca whales found in Washington from early spring to late fall, said Rocky Beach, WDFW wildlife diversity division manager. Major threats to their survival include the declining abundance of salmon, exposure to pollutants and disruptions from passing vessels.

Under state law, it is unlawful to:

- Approach within 100 yards of a southern resident whale.

- Cause a vessel or other object to approach within 100 yards of a southern resident whale.

- Intercept a southern resident whale by remaining in its path until it comes within 100 yards of a vessel.

- Fail to disengage the transmission of a vessel that is within 100 yards of a southern resident whale.

- Feed a southern resident whale.

Additional information about the state law is available on the WDFW website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/diversty/soc/orca/index.htm> . Whale-watching guidelines are available at <http://www.bewhalewise.org> .