



# Marine Wildlife Watching Guidelines

## (Whales & Dolphins, Seals and Seabirds)

### For Vessel & Zodiac Operations

## Introduction

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) has developed the following Wildlife Watching Guidelines to provide guidance to vessel operators while viewing cetaceans, seals, and birds in their marine environment. In addition, these guidelines suggest additional ways to comply with Annex II (Conservation of Antarctic Fauna and Flora) of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. The guidelines do not replace any domestic governmental laws, but provide an additional code of conduct to help reduce potential disturbance to the marine environment. Some countries have guidelines or regulations stricter than these, and which may override these guidelines. Violations may be punishable by fines, imprisonment and, in extreme cases, seizure of vessel. Members/operators of IAATO should be aware that compliance with these guidelines might be insufficient to prevent violation of, and penalties resulting from, national laws and regulations.

Compliance with the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea has priority over these guidelines at all times.

## A. These Guidelines are Intended for:

- Use by any vessels ... (e.g. ship, sailboat, yacht, Zodiac, kayak, etc.), by the officers, crew, expedition staff and visitors involved in navigating in wildlife-rich areas during viewing sessions. (Note: The use of jet-skis, surfboards or windsurfers should not occur in areas of known wildlife.)
- Providing standard operating procedures in order to minimize wildlife disturbance.
- Protecting cetaceans, seals and seabirds and ensuring a maximum high quality wildlife-watching experience by responsible observation. (Many passengers themselves are often highly concerned about the welfare of the wildlife and expect high standards of conduct by operators.)
- Avoiding harmful impacts on marine wildlife populations by ensuring that the normal patterns of daily and seasonal activity of the animals are maintained in the short and long term.

*Competent, careful boat handling avoids harming wildlife and leads to better wildlife watching.*

## B. Possible Impacts from Vessels

Possible negative impacts from vessel operations include physical injury, interference or disruption of normal behaviour, increased stress, increased underwater noise and possibly increased exposure to predators. In addition, animals could be exposed to increased levels of environmental contaminants such as oil from leaking outboard engines and discharged bilges.

The recommended guidelines will help minimize the level of potential disturbance and should prevent the following from occurring:

- Displacement from important feeding areas.
- Disruption of feeding.
- Disruption of reproductive and other social behaviours.
- Changes to regular migratory pathways to avoid human interaction zones.
- Stress from interaction.
- Injury.
- Increased mortality or decreased productivity/survivorship (and therefore population decline).

## C. Approaching Marine Mammals and Recommended Distances – General Principles

The animal/s should dictate all encounters.

It is very important for vessel operators to be able to evaluate the animal/s' behavioural patterns. This can be difficult in practice and a good reason to have experienced naturalists onboard. The guidelines take into account the approach towards the animals, arrival at and departure from an optimal viewing area, and recommended distances from the animals.

Sometimes an animal will approach a vessel. If a marine mammal wants to interact, it may remain with the vessel. The vessel can then drift passively. If the animal is moving away from the vessel, it is choosing not to interact with or approach the vessel.

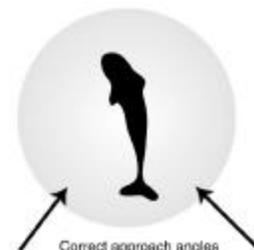
Take all care to avoid collisions. This may include stopping, slowing down, and/or steering away from the animal/s. Do not chase or pursue animals.

The following principles address vessels in general:

### 1. Cetaceans (Whales, Dolphins, Porpoises)

Cetaceans should never be approached directly head-on. Ideally, they should be approached from slightly to the side and rear of the animal (see Figure 1). Once travelling with the animal, travel parallel with it/them.

Figure 1.



## 1a. Vessels, Officers, Crew, Expedition Staff:

- Keep a good lookout forward (and ideally on the sides and from the stern) where cetaceans may be present.
- Always give the animals the benefit of the doubt.
- Avoid sudden change in speed and direction (including putting vessel in reverse).
- Avoid loud noises, including conversation, whistling, etc.
- Keep radios on a low volume setting.
- Should a vessel get closer than the recommended minimum distance, withdraw at a constant, slow, no-wake speed, to at least the recommended minimum distance.
- If animals approach the vessel, put engines in neutral and do not re-engage propulsion until they are observed well clear of your vessel. If the animals remain in a local area, and if it is safe to do so, you may shut off the vessel's engine. Some whales will approach a silent, stationary vessel.

*(Note: Allowing a vessel to drift within accepted recommended distances could constitute an approach.)*

## 1b. Recommended Minimum Approach Distances:

- No intentional approach within 30 meters or 100 feet for Zodiacs, 100 meters or 300 feet for ships (150m/500 ft. if ship over 20,000 tons. 200m/600 ft. if 2 ships present).

- Current International Regulations:

**Argentina & Brazil:** 100m/300 ft. with engines on.  
50m/150 ft. with engines off.

**South Africa:** Licensed vessels only within 300m/1000 ft.  
No go zones e.g. Walker's Bay, Hermanus.

**Australia:** 100m/300 ft. whales 50m/150 ft. dolphins.

**New Zealand:** 50m/150 ft. No wake within 300m/1000 ft.  
(NB 200m/600 ft. from Sperm and baleen whales with calves.)

**USA:** 30m/100 ft. except Alaska 100m/300 ft. and all Northern Right Whales 500m/1500 ft. (Handheld range finders may prove useful.)

**Canada:** 100m/300 ft.

- Helicopters or any aircraft should not approach closer than 300 meters or 1000 feet vertical distance. Helicopters are banned from over-flying cetaceans in Australian waters (minimum altitude 1000m/3000 ft.). In New Zealand the minimum altitude is 150m/500 ft. Argentina 150m/500 ft. Alaska 500m/1500 ft. *Aircraft should cease contact if the animals repeatedly dive or increase speed.*

## 1c. Awareness of the Animal/s' Behavioural Patterns:

Be aware of changes in behaviour of the animal/s.

- If the cetacean is agitated or no longer interested in staying near the vessel, the following behavioural changes may be observed:
  - The animal starts to leave the area.
  - Regular changes in direction or speed of swimming.
  - Hasty dives.
  - Changes in respiration patterns.
  - Increased time spent diving compared to time spent at the surface.
  - Changes in acoustic behaviour.
  - Certain surface behaviours such as tail slapping or trumpet blows.
  - Changes in travelling direction.

- Repetitive diving.
- General agitation.

- Do not stay with the animal/s too long. Suggested: 15 minutes – 1 hour. If disturbance or change in behaviour occurs, retreat slowly and quietly.
- Never herd (circle), separate, scatter, or pursue a group of marine mammals, particularly mothers and young.
- If a cetacean approaches a vessel to bow-ride, vessels should not change course or speed suddenly. Do not enter a group of dolphins to encourage them to bow-ride.
- If a cetacean surfaces in the vicinity of your vessel, take all necessary precautions to avoid collisions. This may include stopping, slowing down, and/or steering away from the animal.
- Do not feed any wild animals. This includes throwing food or garbage in the water in their vicinity.
- Avoid touching or sudden movements that might startle the cetacean.
- If a cetacean comes close to shore or your boat, remain quiet.
- Playback of underwater sound of any kind should not occur. This includes recorded whale or dolphin sounds. By all means, do use hydrophones to listen to the underwater sounds (usually an engines off situation, ideal for Zodiacs rather than ships). The sounds can be listened to on headphones/mini speakers and, of course, recorded. There are a number of sites on the Internet, which offer hydrophones for sale.

## 1d. When the Vessel is In Sight of Whales:

*Approximately 3000 to 1500 meters/Two to one mile away*

- Reduce speed to less than 10 knots.
- Post a dedicated lookout to assist the vessel operator in monitoring the location of all marine mammals.

*1500 to 750 meters/One to one-half mile away*

- Reduce speed to 5 knots.

*Approximately 750 meters/Half a mile or closer*

- Reduce speed to less than 5 knots.
- Manoeuvre vessel to avoid a head-on approach.
- Avoid sudden gear changes (*i.e.*, into reverse).

## 1e. Close Approach Procedure for Vessels and/or Zodiacs:

*Approximately 200 meters/600 feet or closer:*

- Approach at no faster than 'no-wake' speed or at idle, whichever is slower.
- Approach the animal/s from parallel to and slightly to the rear (see Figure 1).
- Never attempt an approach head-on or from directly behind.
- Approach from behind and to one side at 4 or 8 o'clock to the whales heading 12 o'clock (see Figure 1).
- Stay well clear of feeding baleen whales.
- Try to position your vessel downwind of the animals to avoid engine fumes drifting over them.
- Communication between vessels and Zodiacs in multi-vessel approaches should be established, to coordinate viewing and to ensure that you do not disturb or harass the animals.
- Do not 'box-in' cetaceans or cut off their travel or exit routes. This is particularly important when more than one vessel is present.



- Vessels should position themselves adjacent to each other to ensure the cetaceans have large open avenues to depart through if desired.
- Beware of local geography – never trap animals between the vessel and shore. Assess the presence of obstacles such as other vessels, structures, natural features, rocks and shoreline.
- *Remember: Avoid sudden or repeated changes in direction, speed or changing gears when close to marine mammals.*

### 1f. Close Approach Zone:

(Note: Ideally this should be no more than one vessel at a time)

*Approximately 30 meters/100 feet for Zodiacs/  
100 meters/300 feet for ships.*

- When stopping to watch cetaceans, put your engines in neutral and allow the motor to idle without turning off; or allow the motor to idle for a minute or two before turning off. This prevents abrupt changes in noise that can startle the animals.
- Avoid excess engine use, gear changes, manoeuvring or backing up to the animals. These produce sudden, large changes in underwater noise levels, which may startle, agitate or drive the animals away.
- Avoid the use of bow or stern lateral thrusters to maintain position. Thrusters can produce intensive cavitations (air bubble implosion) underwater.
- Be aware that whales may surface in unexpected locations.
- Breaching, tail-lobbing or flipper slapping whales may be socialising and may not be aware of boats. Keep your distance.
- Feeding humpback whales often emit sub-surface bubbles before rising to feed at the surface. Avoid these light green bubble patches.
- Emitting periodic noise may help whales know your location and avoid whale and boat collisions. For example, if your Zodiac engine is not running, occasionally tap on the engine casing with a hard object (not your radio!).
- If cetaceans approach within 30 meters or 100 feet of your vessel, put engines in neutral and do not re-engage propulsion until they are observed clear of harm's way from your vessel. On rare occasions, whales have been seen to use ships as 'backscratchers', remain drifting.
- Stay quiet (turn that radio down) and restrict passenger movement in Zodiacs during close encounters.
- Enjoy the experience.

### 1g. Departure Procedures:

- Move off at a slow 'no-wake' speed to the minimum distance of the close approach zone. Avoid engaging propellers within the minimum approach distance, if possible.

- Always move away from the animals to their rear, *i.e.*, not in front of them.
- Do not chase or pursue 'departing' animals.

### 1h. Swimming with Cetaceans:

Swimmers should stay at least 30 meters/100 feet from wild animals (it's up to the animal to come closer). Human and animal safety cannot be guaranteed and great caution should be exercised. If in doubt, retreat. Cetaceans and seals can occasionally be aggressive and attack. Operators may want clients to sign a special waiver before entering the water for any potential encounter. Ongoing research into the subject is continuing, see [www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org) for more information and updates.

- Swimming or snorkelling only. No Scuba (except supervised ice diving). Do not enter the water within 30m/100 ft. of the animals nor dive or jump in. Swim with gentle, quiet movements. Approach animals from the side and rear. Do not swim with calves of the year or pods with calves of the year. Vessels to maintain their normal distances.
- **Argentina:** No swimming with cetaceans.
- **New Zealand:** No swimming with whales.
- **Brazil:** no swimming within 50m/100 ft. of cetaceans.

## 2. Seals

### 2a. General Guidelines:

Seals hauled out on land, rock or ice are sensitive to boats and human presence. Noises, smells and sights may elicit a reaction. When observing seals in water, please apply similar principles as outlined for cetaceans. On land, be aware of seal behaviour that indicates a seal has been disturbed.

- When viewing seals on ice or land, do not surround or separate them, especially mothers and pups. Stay on the side where they can see you.
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea, walk 'above' them.
- Try not to break their horizon.
- Do not feed them.
- Pups are often left alone when the mother is feeding. They are not abandoned and should be left alone and not touched.
- Keep commentary, conversation and engine noise to a minimum.
- Be aware of your radio volume.
- Any seal response other than a raised head should be avoided.
  - Beware head raised and moving (open mouth in defense posture for Leopard Seal on ice, or Elephant Seal on land).
  - If a seal dives, you should retreat.
  - If a herd moves towards the water or there is a hurried entry into the water by many individuals, you should retreat.

Suggested minimum distances ashore 5-10 meters (25 meters from jousting bulls) New Zealand: 5 meters. Beware of animals in tussock grass areas. Ideally, staff member should lead, carrying walking stick or equivalent.

### 2b. Swimming with Seals:

The suggestions for cetaceans apply. See 1h.

### 3. Seabirds

#### 3a. General Guidelines:

- Birds such as penguins may be subject to disturbance by Zodiac operations close to landings or colonies.
- Approach or depart a landing or colony slowly to minimize any disturbance.
- Staff/crew should assess the best landing point – ideally as far from the birds as possible. This is particularly important if birds are moulting near the shore.
- Avoid blocking ‘walkways’ in colonies and water entry and exit points. Avoid boat operations in water where birds enter and exit, are bathing, or are feeding close to colonies.
- Be aware of birds in the water and slow down and/or alter course to avoid any collision.

Sometimes spectacular concentrations of seabirds may be found out at sea – rafts of birds either on the surface, diving from it, or simply resting and bathing. Many of these birds may have flown hundreds if not thousands of miles, often to find food for their young.



- Stay on the fringes of these concentrations. Ships should stay 100 meters and Zodiacs 30 meters away.
- There may be occasions when swimming penguins find themselves in a Zodiac when they ‘porpoise’, landing on the deck. Occupants should remain quiet and wait for the penguin to find its own way over the side and return to the water, normally by jumping onto the anchor box. It is normally not necessary to assist.

The same advice applies to ‘feeding frenzies’, which may involve species diving from the air into and under the surface of the sea.

- Some seabirds may be attracted to drifting vessels.
- Under no circumstances should ‘chumming’ (depositing fish guts or oil) occur to attract birds south of 60°.
- Never feed wild birds.
- Ashore, keep 5-10 meters from nesting seabirds (10 meters from nesting, 25 meters from displaying Albatross on South Georgia). New Zealand allows approach to 5 meters. Giant Petrels seem particularly prone to disturbance whilst nesting, stay 25-50 meters away, if possible. If parent birds are blocked from returning to their nests, increased predation of eggs and chicks may occur by skuas and gulls.
- Take care in tussock grass where birds may be nesting, including in burrows under bare earth.
- If skuas (jaegers) or terns start dive-bombing, they are protecting young or nests. Retreat in the direction you approached from.

#### 4. Entanglement and Strandings

- Any animals entangled in fishing equipment, etc., should be assisted where possible. Please use experienced staff/crew for these situations.
- Photographs of the entanglement should be taken. Please complete a report and send it to IAATO.
- Should you not be able to assist, please record details including Lat and Long, species, and type of entanglement. Please report

the event as soon as possible, so assistance may be sought from other vessels that may have experienced staff.

- Details of dead (floating) cetaceans and ‘strandings’ (beached) animals should be recorded. Where possible, please take photographs recording the front and side of the head of the animal (for species identification). Please include a scale of measurement (e.g., a ruler or Zodiac paddle) in the photographs.

#### 5. Identification and Data Collection

Identifying and, in many cases, recording species for trip-log purposes is part of most onboard naturalists’ remit. Logs, which include this data and the Latitude and Longitude of sightings, species identification and any additional information, such as identification photographs, are of immense value. Please send copies to the IAATO Secretariat ([www.iaato.org](http://www.iaato.org)).

#### Helpful Hints!

- Reducing Pollution from Engines – In all close wildlife encounters, please ensure you are using ‘clean running’ engines, especially on Zodiacs, and are creating minimum air and water pollution (e.g. light oil spills on the sea).
- Viewing Marine Animals – Polarizing sunglasses can considerably enhance viewing of submerged/partially submerged marine mammals in water.
- Encourage the use of binoculars for viewing marine mammals and seabirds.

#### The Following Field Guides are Helpful Tools

*Cetaceans: Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises*  
by Carwardine & Camm 1995

*National Audubon Guide to Marine Mammals of the World*  
by Folkiens et al. 2002

*Seabirds: A Photographic Guide* by Harrison 1987

*A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife* by Shirihai 2002

#### Acknowledgements

*Biologists and expedition staff who have worked many seasons in Antarctica helped to compile these Marine Animal Watching Guidelines:*

Whale watching regulations (as of 24/10/01):

Argentina Law 2381/84

Brazil IBAMA Edict 117 1996

Australia ANZECC Australian National Guidelines for Cetacean Observation 2000

New Zealand Marine Mammals Protection Regulations 1992

USA National Marine Fisheries Service Whale Watching Guidelines 1997

\*Note: Vessel officers and staff should be aware of the full current regulations in place, in their respective operating areas.



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