



Pacific Islands regional guidelines for whale and dolphin watching

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SPREP





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Overarching principles

The Pacific Islands region is important for a great number of cetaceans (whales and dolphins), whether as a permanent habitat, a breeding ground or a migration corridor. Currently, more than thirty species of whales and dolphins have been identified in this area.

The presence and diversity of cetaceans in our region has led to the development of whale watching, both on a commercial and recreational basis. Whale watching is defined as viewing activities in the natural environment, of any cetacean species from land, sea or air. Today, this activity provides a sustainable use of humpback and other whales that were exploited to less than 5% of their initial abundance earlier this century, and generates many benefits to communities, contributing to sustainable development.

In order to ensure the conservation of whales and dolphins in the Pacific Islands region, it is our responsibility to minimize the disturbance caused by our presence. Towards that goal, these best practice guidelines have been produced. Their purpose is to ensure the sustainable development of the whale watching industry in the Pacific Islands region. These guidelines constitute a framework that should be interpreted at a national level by individual countries and territories. They apply to all types of whale watching, including dedicated, seasonal and opportunistic commercial operators, and recreational vessels.

The overarching principles of these guidelines are:

- **Ensuring the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Islands region.**
- **Ensuring a precautionary approach to the development and management of whale watching in the region.**
- **Minimizing the impact of whale watching activities in the region.**
- **Promoting and respecting cultural values of whales, dolphins and the marine environment to Pacific Island peoples.**
- **Providing long-term economic benefits and opportunities to local communities.**

Management considerations

To minimize the risk of adverse impacts caused by whale and dolphin watching and to ensure the sustainable development of this industry, accurate management strategies need to be implemented. Several tools and approaches should be considered:

- National licensing or permitting schemes to regulate the number and size of vessels, standards of operation and site specific requirements;
- National measures to regulate approaches, frequency, length and type of exposure in encounters with cetaceans;
- Management measures may include closed seasons, 'no go' areas, and 'no approach times' to provide additional protection to critical habitats, populations, and individuals;
- Assessment of the numbers, distribution and other characteristics of the target population/s before the implementation of tourism operations to establish the feasibility of the industry and a baseline for monitoring;
- Where new whale watching operations are evolving, start cautiously, moderating activity and adapting management until sufficient information is available to guide further development;
- Monitor the effectiveness of management provisions and modify them as required to reflect new information and circumstances;
- Establish an enforcement framework to ensure compliance with management provisions, including through customary marine tenure systems;
- Ongoing scientific research, socio-economic monitoring, assessment of potential impacts on cetaceans, and collection and sharing of information by all stakeholders;
- Disseminate information on best practice and research to improve public awareness, including amongst recreational and commercial vessel owners;
- Ongoing operator training and accreditation programs on the biology and behavior of target species, best practice whale watching operations, and the management provisions in effect;
- Encourage, support and protect Pacific Islands communities' participation and ownership of the whale watching industry;
- Educational standards for the provision of accurate and informative material to whale watch participants, to:
 - Develop an informed and environmentally responsible public;
 - Encourage development of realistic expectations of encounters to avoid disappointment and pressure to breach guidelines.

NB: Many coastal waters in Oceania are under customary marine tenure systems and customary owners may choose to restrict access or activities within these areas.

Disturbance

Cetaceans may be disturbed by the presence of people, vessels or aircrafts.

Whale and dolphin watching activities can potentially cause long-term disturbance to cetacean populations, which include:

- Disruption of behaviour (e.g. feeding, nursing, mating, migrating);
- Displacement from important habitat areas (e.g. resting, feeding, breeding and calving areas);
- Long term stress;
- Injury;
- Reduced breeding success;
- Increased mortality.

Changes in the behaviour of whales and dolphins need to be recognised and acknowledged as such, so that animals can be left undisturbed. The following behaviours may indicate that a whale or dolphin is affected by our presence:

- Changes in swimming speed or direction (to avoid a boat);
- Changes in breathing/diving patterns;
- Stopping or changing activity patterns (e.g. vocalizing, feeding, nursing, socialising);
- Changes in group size and cohesion;
- Changes in acoustic behaviour; and
- Surface behaviours such as peduncle tail throws, and trumpet blows.

Populations, and individual cetaceans may react differently depending on the species, their age, sex, and if accompanied by a calf.

Guidelines for interactions with cetaceans

Persons shall always:

- Operate vessels, and aircrafts so as not to disrupt the normal movement or behavior of whales and dolphins.
- Stop any interactions with a cetacean at any sign of the animal becoming disturbed or alarmed.
- Allow cetaceans to determine the nature and duration of 'interactions'.

Therefore, the following recommendations need to be considered:

- Do not touch a cetacean.
- Do not feed a cetacean.
- Do not make any loud or sudden noises.
- Do not make sudden or repeated changes in direction or speed.
- Dedicated observer(s) should be on duty in addition to the captain of the vessel.
- Do not place a vessel up wind of, or in a position where it will drift into, the no-approach zone.
- When vessels are within the caution zone of whales or dolphins:
 - Approach cetaceans slowly and cautiously;
 - Observe cetaceans at a speed not exceeding the speed of the animals.
- No more than 3 vessels should be in the caution zone of a whale or a dolphin at a time.
- Leave boat engine on and in idle when watching cetaceans.
- Do not disperse or separate a group of cetacean.
- A vessel should not chase, encircle, block the direction of travel of cetaceans, or position itself in the middle of a pod.
- If cetaceans approach a vessel, slow down gradually and put engines in idle.
- If cetaceans approach a vessel to bow-ride, maintain a slow and steady speed and avoid sudden changes in course.
- When departing from watching cetaceans, determine where the animals are relative to the vessel to avoid collisions or coming too close to the animals, and increase speed gradually while exiting the caution zone.

Vessels

Prohibited vessels

Certain vessels should not be used for whale and dolphin watching. These include all personal motorized watercraft (e.g. jet skis and similar crafts, and underwater vessels), parasail, remotely operated craft, wing in ground effect craft, hovercraft, windsurfers, kite surfers.

Allowable vessels

Vessels recommended for use in whale and dolphin watching include all other motorized and/or sail craft (e.g. motorboats, yachts, inflatable craft), as well as aircrafts and helicopters.

Angles and distances of approach

The most appropriate method for approaching a whale or a dolphin is from the side and slightly to the rear of the animal. Avoid approaches from head on or directly from behind.

Caution zone

- The caution zone is the area within 100m - 300m from a whale and 50m - 300m from a dolphin.

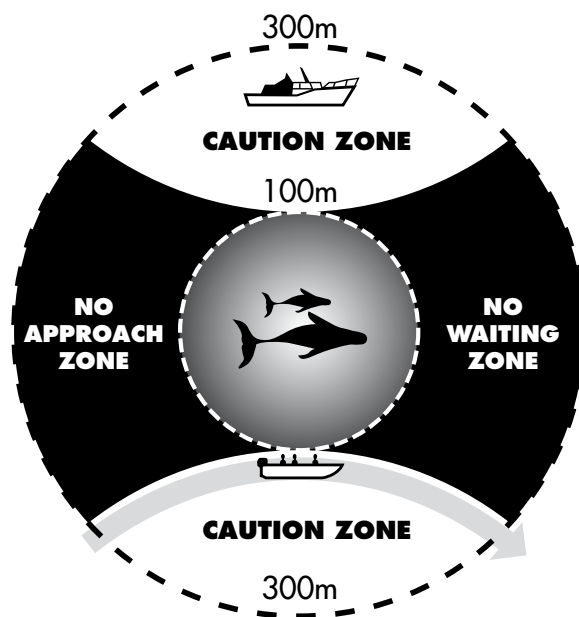


Figure 1: Approach distances for whales.

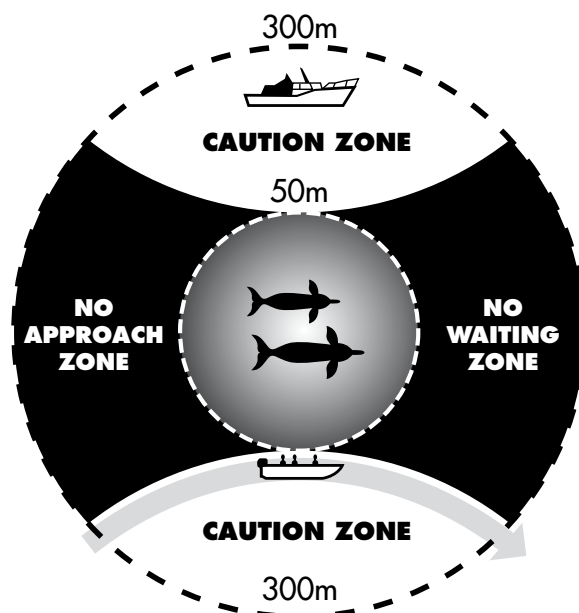


Figure 2: Approach distances for dolphins.

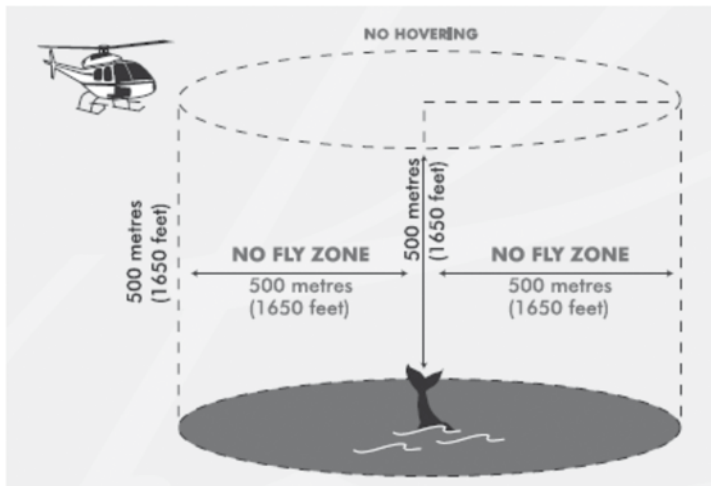


Figure 3: Approach distances for helicopters

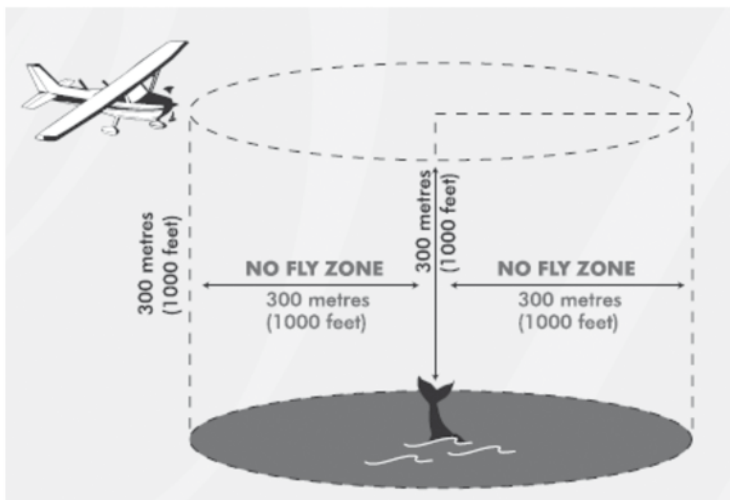


Figure 4: Approach distances for aircraft

(All diagrams courtesy DEWHA Australia)

No approach zone

These distances refer to active approaches by vessels moving towards cetaceans. Dolphins and whales may sometimes approach vessels to closer distances. Closer specific approach distances could be considered to reflect local conditions/situations/licensing where changes to the recommended distances would not compromise the protection of the individuals/populations being watched.

- For a vessel, the no approach zone is 100m from a whale and 50m from a dolphin including the area directly in front and behind a pod.
- Prohibited vessels should not enter the caution zone.
- If a vessel accidentally approaches cetaceans closer than the recommended distance, it must move away from the no-approach zone at slow speed.
- Helicopters or gyrocopters must not get closer (in height or distance) than 500 m to a whale or dolphin.
- Other planes must not get closer (in height or distance) than 300 m to a whale or dolphin.

Approaches of mother and calf pairs

Pods of cetaceans containing calves are particularly vulnerable to disturbance and require additional protection.

- Exercise extreme caution with pods containing calves.
- Site-specific restrictions on length of encounter and distance of approach should be considered for pods with calves.

Swimming with cetaceans

Swimming with whales or dolphins may place both people and animals at risk. Risks to humans may include injury and possible death from interactions with large, wild animals. Risks to whales and dolphins may include physical damage from collisions with vessels and people and ecological impacts caused by changes in normal behaviour of the animals.

At present there is little scientific information available on the potential short and long-term impacts of swimming with whales and dolphins. It is therefore recommended that Pacific Island countries that do not currently undertake swim-with whale operations, initiate such activities with much caution until more information is available. Potential operators should seek and rely heavily on advice from current operators, scientist and authorities.

For those countries where swim-with activities are currently being undertaken, it is recommended that the following standards be applied to these operations.

(Countries may also refer to the national examples and standards in appendix 1):

- Scientific studies should be initiated to assess: a) the associated risk to the safety of the people participating in swim-with activities; and b) the current and potential future impacts of these activities on the target cetacean species.
- Particularly sensitive animals (eg mothers with calves) and critical habitats (eg calving grounds) should be provided additional protection (refer to Management Considerations)
- Swimming with the use of any underwater breathing apparatus should not be allowed.
- Underwater flash photography or lighted filming should not be allowed.
- An adaptive precautionary approach should be taken when determining swim-with operating procedures. Consideration should be given to:
 - Regular review of operational standards as credible scientific information on the impacts of swim-with programs becomes more available;
 - All persons in the water with whales or dolphins should be accompanied by an appropriately trained local guide;
 - Limiting the maximum number of vessels permitted to undertake swim-with activities in a region;
 - Limiting the number of swimmers allowed in the water at any one time with a pod;
 - Limiting the maximum interaction time with a pod/population per day, including maximum swim time for each interaction, time required between successive swims and maximum cumulative interaction time per day;
 - Appropriate drop-off distance for swimmers and minimum swimmer distance from animals;
 - Swimmers should not be allowed in the water with surface-active large whales;
 - Prohibit leap-frogging during swim-with encounters and limit the number of swimmer drop off's or attempts.

Glossary

Calves

Calves are young dolphins or whales, approximately half the size or less of adult individuals for their species. They usually travel in close proximity to their mother. Calves are particularly vulnerable as they rely on their mother's care and proximity for survival.

Caution zone

The caution zone is the area within 100 – 300m of a whale or 50 – 300m for a dolphin and within which all vessels should behave according to the guidelines and/or regulations in effect in order to minimize the impact on the animals being approached or watched.

Commercial operator

A commercial operation means an operation carried on for any form of hire or reward, in which persons are transported, conveyed, conducted, or guided where a purpose is to view or come into contact with cetaceans.

Cetaceans

Cetaceans include all species of whales, dolphins and porpoises.

Dedicated observer

A dedicated observer refers to any crewmember or passenger onboard a commercial or recreational whale-watching vessel available to keep a watch for cetaceans. The observer's role is to assist the skipper of the vessel in localizing the animals and keeping track of their movements and behaviours.

Leap frogging

Leap frogging is the maneuver that consists in placing a vessel in the path of a cetacean in order to achieve a closest approach to whales or dolphins. This kind of approach is known to be more disruptive for the animals.

No approach zone

The no approach zone is within 100m from a whale and 50m from a dolphin including the area directly in front of or behind a pod. Vessels should not enter the no approach zone and should not wait in front of the direction of travel of a pod.



Pod

A pod is an individual or a group of more than one cetacean.

Recreational vessel

A recreational vessel refers to any vessel observing whales and dolphins for leisure without implying any form of hire or reward by the transported persons.

Whale watching

Whale watching refers to viewing activities of any cetacean species, both whales and dolphins, from land, sea or air.

Wing in ground effect craft

A wing in ground effect craft is a boat with wings that cruises just above the water surface. It floats on a cushion of relatively high-pressure air created by aerodynamic interaction between the wings and the water surface.

Annex 1:

Summary table of existing guidelines and regulations in the Pacific Region

NZ New Zealand, AUS Australia, FP French Polynesia, NC New Caledonia, Tonga, CI Cook Islands, Hawaii, SA Samoa and Niue.

	NZ	AUS	FP	NC	Tonga	CI	Hawaii	SA	Niue
Guidelines		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Regulations	X	X	X				X		

GENERAL CONDITIONS

Educative material available onboard commercial whale watching boats	X	X							X
Do not to disrupt the normal movement or behaviour of any marine mammal	X	X	X				X	X	
No person shall disturb or harass any marine mammal	X		X	X					X
Avoid touching any marine mammal		X	X					X	
A person should not deliberately feed or attempt to feed a wild whale or dolphin	X	X	X					X	
No rubbish or food shall be thrown near or around any marine mammal	X	X			X			X	

APPROACH METHOD

Approach from a direction that is parallel and slightly to the rear of the animal	X	X	X	X		X			
Follow a parallel route to the animals, without overtaking	X	X	X				X		
Do not intercept the path of travel or approach from head-on	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Do not approach from directly behind		X	X	X	X			X	X
Do not scatter or separate members of a group of cetaceans	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Do not box cetaceans in, cut off their path or prevent them from leaving		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vessels should position themselves adjacent to each other	X	X	X	X			X		
Vessel operators should coordinate their movements by radio contact	X	X	X				X		
If a cetacean approaches your vessel:									
1) place the engines in neutral and let the animal(s) come to you; or,		X	X						
2) slow down and continue on course, avoiding potential collisions; or,		X							
3) steer a straight course away from them.	X	X							
Avoid sudden or repeated changes in direction when within the caution zone	X	X	X			X	X		
If cetaceans show disturbance activities, withdraw immediately	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Move off at a slow 'no wake' speed to the outer limit of the caution zone and gradually increasing speed	X	X	X		X		X		
Avoid blocking the animals against reef or land			X	X			X		

NOISE

Avoid making loud or sudden noises near cetaceans	X	X			X		X	X	X
Avoid excess engine use, gear changes, manoeuvring or backing up to cetaceans		X	X		X				
Playback of underwater sound of any kind (biological or non-biological) should not occur		X	X						

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Summary table of existing guidelines and regulations in the Pacific Region

	NZ	AUS	FP	NC	Tonga	CI	Hawaii	SA	Niue
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APPROACH DISTANCES - WHALES

50 metres	x		x	x					x
100 metres		x			x	x	x	x	
300 metres if 3 vessels within 300 metres of any marine mammal	x	x							
Caution zone within 300 metres of whales	x	x	x		x	x			

APPROACH DISTANCES - DOLPHINS

30 metres			x						
50 metres		x							
100 metres								x	
Caution zone within 150 metres of dolphins		x							
OBSERVATION TIME									
30 minutes			x						x
1 hour								x	
To be limited					x		x		

SPEED

Approach speed should be less than 3 knots when entering the caution zone		x	x		x			x	x
Avoid sudden or repeated changes in speed when within the caution zone	x	x	x				x		
When within the caution zone of a cetacean, move at a constant, slow ('no wake') speed	x	x				x	x	x	x

DISTURBANCE BEHAVIOUR

Attempt to leave the area or vessel		x	x			x	x	x	x
Regular changes in direction or speed of swimming		x	x			x	x	x	x
Changes in respiration patterns		x	x			x	x	x	x
Changes in acoustic behaviour		x	x						
Surface behaviours such as tail slaps		x	x				x		

SPECIFIC CONDITIONS FOR GROUPS WITH CALVES

Limit observation time			x						
Do not approach closer than 100m to any pod with calves			x						x
Do not approach closer than 200m to any pod with calves	x							x	
Do not approach closer than 300m to any pod with calves		x							
Should you mistakenly approach such a pod:									
1) stop the engines or place them in neutral		x							
2) withdraw immediately at a constant slow 'no wake' speed to the outside of the caution zone		x							

NUMBER OF BOATS

Limited to one boat within the caution zone						x	x		
Avoid having more than three boats within the caution zone at one time	x								
Do not enter the caution zone if already 2 boats present within 300 metres of a pod		x			x			x	

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	NZ	AUS	FP	NC	Tonga	CI	Hawaii	SA	Niue
LAND-BASED OBSERVATIONS									
Respect the environment		X			X	X			
TYPE OF VESSEL									
Jet skis forbidden within the caution zone		X			X	X		X	X
AERIAL OBSERVATIONS									
Maintain a distance of over 300 metres		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Maintain a distance of over 150 metres	X								
Do not land on water close to a pod of cetaceans		X			X				
Helicopters forbidden					X				
Do not approach the animals from head-on		X							
SWIM WITH ENCOUNTERS									
Deliberately swimming with cetaceans is prohibited		X		X		X	X		
Swimmers must not approach closer than 30m to a pod of cetaceans		X	X						X
Swimmers must not approach closer than 100m to a pod of cetaceans	X							X	
Swimmers required to go with a locally licensed operator					X				X
No more than 4 people plus one guide per vessel may swim with any one group of cetaceans at a time					X				
No more than 6 people per vessel may swim with any one group of cetaceans at a time									X
Other vessels must keep more than 100m away from the swimmers vessel					X				X

