

# Whale Watching Guidelines

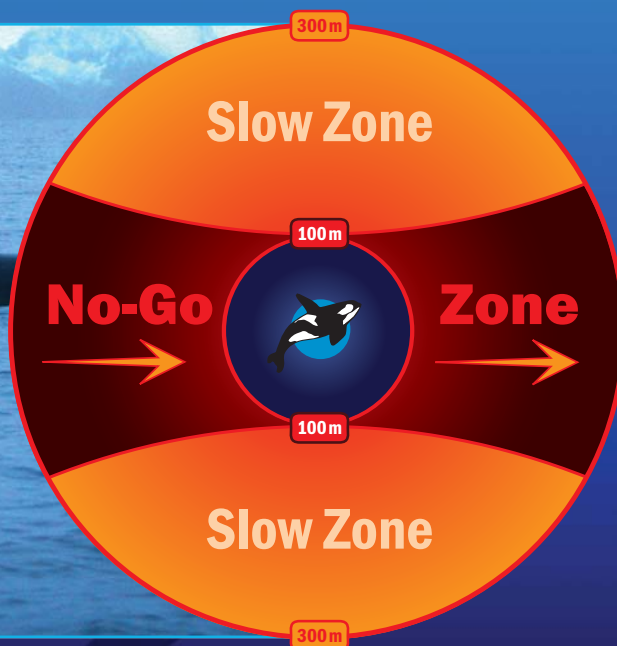
## Whale Watching Guidelines in Short

- Approach slowly (max 5 knots)
- Parallel the whales, and approach slowly from the side
- Keep distance of 100 m then idle / turn engine off and wait for the whales to approach
- Maximum 3 boats at 100 m around one group of whales
- Leave the whales after 30 minutes
- Other boats wait > 500 m for their turn to view the whales or find a new group
- Keep noise level down. No racing engines, no sonar, no horns
- When leaving, do so slowly. Accelerate gradually when > 300 m away
- Keep at least 300 m distance to resting whales
- Once the whales dive or change their swimming direction every time you approach, keep a great distance and leave the area slowly

## Signs of disturbance:

- Whales diving every time the boat approaches
- Whales changing direction continuously (on surface or under dive)
- Whales forming a tight group and swimming away from the boat
- Resting killer whales usually turn away from the boats and are best left alone
- Whales change behaviour suddenly (e.g. from slow travelling to fast travelling, from socialising/feeding to travelling)
- Adult whales are slapping their tails repeatedly

When the above-mentioned signs appear, the whales should be left alone and not be approached again. Communicate with other whale watching boats in the area and search for a new group.



Photos: H. Vester (ocean-sounds.com)  
Design: A. Mähner (pinseltierchen.de)



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## Guidelines for Killer Whale Safaris in Norway

Learning about the killer whales' behaviour will minimise impact & disturbance of the whales as well as enhancing your guests' experience. That is why we ask you to make use of the following information when going on whale watching trips. If you are a skipper, please inform your crew members about these guidelines for whale watching.

The following guidelines are based on existing guidelines for killer whale watching, and have been supplemented by information from other places, e.g. the USA & Canada, where whale watching has a long tradition. These guidelines are supplemented with experiences we have gathered ourselves through our long-term research project.

Killer whales coming close to land in Northern Norway during winter enter a critical time and habitat: they come to feed and to breed (to give birth and nurture their newborns). We therefore need to pay close attention to the behaviour of the whales in order to minimise disturbance. Only then can we have a sustainable whale watching business. Make sure you learn to understand the behaviour of the whales before you go on whale watching tours.

These guidelines are voluntary, but of course we hope that most whale watching operators will support them. They are written specifically for encounters with killer whales (*Orcinus orca*), but they will also apply for most other whales and seals.

### Killer Whale Behaviour

Whales are more approachable during some behavioural states than others. Therefore you need to learn the basics of killer whale behaviour.

#### Feeding

Killer whales have a variety of prey (from fish to marine mammals) and seem to specialise if nutritious prey is available. In Norway, killer whales feed mostly on herring, but they have been seen feeding on birds and seals, too. They have developed different strategies to capture herring:

- **Carousel feeding:**  
Whales herd herring into tight ball close to surface and stun them with tail slaps. Fish jumping and scales, pieces of fish, and stunned herring can be observed on the surface.
- **Subsurface feeding:**  
Whales swim back and forth in a limited area. Activity of animals on surface, such as porpoising and some tail slaps.
- **Travel feeding:**  
During travelling in a line in loose formations, they stop occasionally to feed individually.
- **Seine fishing feeding:**  
Killer whales also follow fishing boats seining for herring and feed on the discarded fish of these operations.  
This behaviour occurred and increased during the last years, due to an increase in herring catch quotas.

#### Travelling

Whales moving forward, with all animals in the group facing the same direction, either in a line or in groups.

#### Socialising

Whales are engaged in a variety of physical interactions and aerial behaviours such as breaching, spy hopping, headstands, lobtailing and flipper slaps, rolling around, chasing each other, and sexual behaviour.

#### Resting

Whales floating motionless at the surface for a few minutes, or swimming slowly in tight groups, diving and surfacing in a regular pattern.

When feeding or socialising, they are often more tolerant to boats. Travelling whales can be followed slowly (adjust boat speed to the speed of the whales) in a parallel course. Leave at signs of disturbance. Whales that are disturbed during travelling may be prevented from reaching places that may be important for activities such as feeding, resting or socialising. Needless to say, these behaviours are to a different extent critical for the survival of the killer whales.



### What to do when you spot whales:

- Slow down at >300 m from the nearest animals and observe their behaviour for a few minutes before approaching.  
After you have assessed the whales' behaviour, direction, and speed, approach them at maximum 5 knots. Whales typically travel at 3-4 knots, which means that you will catch up to them easily if you travel at 5 knots. Driving faster will increase disturbance and may invoke avoidance behaviour. This, in turn, will affect your costumers' experience with the whales negatively.
- Be considerate of other whale watchers, so that all have a chance to view without disturbance. Maintain radio communication with other boats in the area. The best approach is to take turns viewing the whales. Rotate every 30 minutes to view whales. After a viewing time of 30 minutes the boats should leave the whales and search for a new group. They should not return to the same group afterwards.  
Maximum number of boats (regardless of their size) around one group of killer whales is three (3). Boats approaching later must wait at a distance of at least 500 m from the whales and wait for their turn or find another group of whales. The waiting boats should be clustered together at one place to minimise disturbance (idling or engines shut off).

### How to approach whales

- Approach no closer than 100 m and parallel the whales (i.e. go their direction without alteration of course) at their current speed, or shift your engine into neutral (idle) or shut it off.
- Approach killer whales from the side, never directly from behind or head-on. If whales head towards you, put the engine in neutral or shut it off, then wait. The whales must be given a chance to choose whether to pass by or to avoid the boat.  
Boats should not "leap frog", i.e. repeatedly rush to position themselves in front of the whales. This will only invoke avoidance behaviour and will affect your business negatively. It is far better to be patient and wait for the whales to approach you.



## When close to the whales

If the whales are:

### Feeding

Keep a distance of 100 m from the feeding action at all times. If the feeding is moving closer to your boat, move away from it. You should be careful NOT to be in the whales' way! DO NOT drop snorkellers over the herring. However, if you lie still with your engine turned off: do not move, but let the whales simply pass by you. By starting your engine you will just cause unnecessary noise and disturbance.

### Seine feeding

When whales feed from a fishing boat, keep a distance of 200 m from the fishing boat and stop your boat at one position. Don't move back and forth; you may disturb the fishermen's fishing activities as well as the feeding whales.

### Socialising

This is the best time to view whales! Nevertheless, approach them carefully, make yourself aware of their whereabouts, especially if they show up behind your boat, close to the propellers. Then you should slowly put your engine into neutral. THIS is the best time to introduce snorkellers!

### Travelling

Go parallel to whales, adjust to their speed, and move with them at a 100 m distance. Do not trap them between land and your boat.

### Resting

Resting whales should be left alone, keep a distance of 300 m, turn off your engine. DO NOT introduce snorkellers.

### Mating

Keep a distance of 100 m and turn off your engine. DO NOT introduce snorkellers.

### Breeding/calving

If you witness a birth, leave the animals alone or keep a distance of >300 m. Turn off your engine! DO NOT introduce snorkellers.

## How long can you stay with the whales?

- The time spent with the whales should be limited to 30 minutes when within 100 m from the whales.
- Leave whales slowly! When leaving the group: start your engine only after the whales are more than 200 m away from you. Depart slowly, gradually accelerating when more than 300 m away.

## Keep noise down / at a minimum

- Keep noise levels down. Avoid horns, whistles, or racing engines. Turn off your fish finder signals / sonar signals. When observing feeding killer whales, the skippers must remember that the killer whales in Norwegian waters feed on herring very close to the surface, and that herring react to engine noise. Motoring close to feeding killer whale may result in fish swimming away from the boat and away from the killer whales. Essentially, it may result in disturbing the whole feeding. The best strategy for observing feeding killer whales is to idle or turn off the engine, and to enjoy the view.
- Killer whales, like all other whales and dolphins, live in a world of sounds where vocalizations and hearing play an important role in all aspects of their lives (social behaviour, feeding, navigating, etc.). Therefore the noise level in the sea should be kept low.

Boats that are very noisy should not be used for whale watching. If used nevertheless, they should keep a greater distance (> 500 m) to the whales and reduce their speed, even stopping their engines and approach the whales with smaller less noisy boats.

- It is important that all vessels restrict their movements to the greatest extent possible and avoid surrounding the whales. When whales are travelling close to shore, avoid herding them near shore or in between your boat and the shore (do not trap them between your boat and the shoreline). Necessary course alterations should be kept small and made slowly.

## Guidelines for snorkelling and diving

Although no incidents have been reported of killer whales hurting a swimmer in Norwegian waters, this is not a safety guarantee. Killer whales in Norway are known to feed on seals and birds as well as on herring, they are top predators, and in Canada snorkelling with the whales is strictly forbidden. Should you take the risk of viewing whales underwater, it can be a great experience. But this type of whale watching puts especially high demands on both the operators and the passengers. Only physically fit and experienced people should be taken on such trips. Way too often boats with divers approach too fast and too close to the whales, believing that this is the best way of getting a "close view" of the whales. In practice this sort of boat behaviour only disturbs the whales and scares them off.

The most limiting factor for this activity is the weather condition. In windy situations snorkellers are not permitted in the water because they can drift away too easily. Otherwise, the same guidelines of approaching, staying with, and departing from the whales apply for boats with snorkellers as for those without.

The divers should be released into the water in a distance from the whales, not midst into action (e.g. feeding). Let the whales decide whether they want to approach the people or not. Divers should swim slowly, best is to just lie on the water surface calmly and watch. The best time to view whales "underwater" is when they are socialising, then you often have whales curiously approaching the snorkellers. Snorkellers should not be introduced into the water when whales are resting, mating, and breeding/giving birth or show signs of disturbance.

It is also extremely important to be aware of the presence of other vessels, and to not let divers into the water in situations where other boats might have difficulties in spotting them. Keep a diving flag in a highly visible position on your boat at all times!

Only a maximum of 4 divers should be released into the water at the same time, to minimise noise and disturbance through movements, and to maximise the divers' safety. One additional safety diver should be in the water with the snorkellers at all times.



## Research

We still know so little about killer whales in Norway, and research is crucial for a better understanding and protection of these magnificent animals. Therefore be aware of research boats in the area. The boats are often recognised by showing a flag with an "F" or "Forskning" on it. Over VHF you can communicate with them and find out what they are doing. Often they record sounds and natural behaviour of the whales, and boats that approach very fast will disturb the research. By communicating with them you can learn about their research and gain valuable information which may also be interesting for your customers. Researchers are not bound to the whale watching guidelines but should respect the whales and whale watchers and behave accordingly.

Ocean Sounds is based in Henningsvaer and owns a 7.3m grey zodiac RIB. Its VHF calling sign is: "Ocean Sounds".

**We conduct research on whales and other marine wildlife all year round. We ask you kindly to cooperate with us and call us when you encounter whales or see anything unexpected.**

We will be glad to help you, and to share our knowledge with you.

Last but not least, please remember we are only guests out at the sea. Let us not forget NOT to throw any garbage into the sea! This includes also any kind of cigarette filters: they do not degrade, and they pollute the water.

Thank you very much for your cooperation, and for making whale watching a wonderful, safe, and sustainable experience in Northern Norway!

*Photos: H. Vester (ocean-sounds.com), Marten Bril  
Design: A. Mähner (pinseltierchen.de)*



**If you have any questions, comments or suggestions on how the guidelines ought to be changed or enhanced, please contact us:**

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## More information about whale watching:

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