



Whale and Dolphin Guidelines

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Imagine a peaceful Friday afternoon. You and your family and friends are enjoying a picnic in the open air, talking and laughing and savouring a delicious meal. Suddenly a band of motorcycles roars into your picnic ground. The sound is deafening. The bikers careen through the middle of your picnic mat, scattering food everywhere and terrifying children and adults alike. The bikers seem to take pleasure in watching your startled and frightened response as you and your family jump up and scatter every which way trying to avoid being run down by a motorcycle. A ludicrous thought? Impossible to imagine that any one would behave in such a senseless and cruel manner? In fact, this is what happens each time a whale or dolphin-watching vessel pursues its quarry without proper care and consideration.

The growing whale and dolphin watching industry worldwide helps to increase public awareness and appreciation of whales and dolphins. Properly run tours which incorporate research and education opportunities can make a valuable contribution toward conservation of these intelligent and sensitive marine mammals. Responsible tour operators will also take the animals' best interests to heart and will avoid any practices that might be stressful or disturbing for them.

In the past three years, a small number of tour operators in the Muscat area have started to capitalize on the abundance and variety of cetacean species found in local waters. Local residents and tourists from abroad can take commercially operated boat tours along the coast and marvel at the acrobatic displays of Spinner dolphins, Common dolphins and Bottlenose dolphins. In the winter months, they also have a good chance of catching a glimpse of Humpback, Minke or Bryde's whales.

As the local industry grows, tour operators will need to take special care to protect the resource that they are exploiting. Some operators may be tempted to speed through groups of dolphins to make them jump, or approach whales so closely that they slap their tails or fins. These operators may not be aware that the displays are actually signs of warning or discomfort. Customers who participate in these tours may unwittingly contribute to the harassment of whales and dolphins. If continued, these practices could eventually drive the animals away from the areas where they can be easily observed and operators would ultimately destroy their own business.

A growing body of scientific evidence supports our common sense assumptions about potential effects of irresponsible whale-watching. For example, we know that, like motorcycles roaring through a picnic, the noise of boat engines is likely to interfere with communication and echolocation activities of whales and dolphins. Similarly, many dolphins have scars and evidence of damage to their dorsal fins, which may have been caused by boat propellers that could not be avoided in time.

Studies in New Zealand and British Columbia have also shown that tourist and fishing boats can distract dolphins and killer whales from important feeding, resting and socializing behaviours.





As the whale watching industry grows, higher numbers of boats present over longer periods of time may deprive the observed populations of needed food and rest. Higher levels of boat traffic may also induce stress and anxiety in observed populations, especially if boats are unpredictable, or extremely persistent in their movements, forcing whales or dolphins to take evasive measures to avoid collision with hulls or propellers. Over a period of time, accumulated stress and deprivation of food or rest may harm the overall biological fitness of a population or force them to permanently abandon the area where they are being observed.

Many countries with well-developed whale-watching industries have found it necessary to implement and enforce strict guidelines to prevent harassment of whales and dolphins. Oman has yet to implement formal guidelines or regulations. However, there are a number of things that you as an individual can do to help prevent harassment of local whale and dolphin populations. Whether you are watching them from your own boat on the weekend, or participating in a commercially operated tour, adhering to or encouraging your tour operator to adhere to the guidelines below will help limit the impact we humans have on the species we are so keen to observe. It may also help to ensure that they will still be here for others to enjoy in the near future.

Whale and dolphin watching guidelines

Do:

- Let the whales or dolphins choose how they will interact with you.
- Slow down to a "no wake" speed 300 m from whales or dolphins.
- Approach from a position parallel and slightly behind.
- Limit your approach to 100 m for whales and 50 m for dolphins.
- If the whales or dolphins approach closer, turn off your engine or let the motor idle.
- Maintain a predictable course or speed.
- Limit the amount of time you spend with a group, especially if there are other boats in the area.

Don't

- Approach groups of whales or dolphins head on.
- Speed through groups of whales or dolphins.
- Separate groups (particularly groups with young).
- Block their direction of travel or attempt to herd them in any way.
- Throw rubbish in the water or attempt to feed them.
- Chase animals if they are clearly trying to avoid the boat or leave the area.