

# Whales

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**COMMON NAME:** Humpback Whale

**HAWAIIAN NAME:** *Kohala*

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Megaptera novaeangliae*

**LEGAL STATUS:** Protected under the MMPA, State Endangered Species law, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and the International Whaling Commission moratorium against whaling.

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**APPEARANCE:** Adult humpback whales range from 40 to 50 feet in length and weigh 25 to 40 tons. Heads are broad and rounded and bodies are round, narrowing towards the tail. There is a dorsal fin on their back and ventral grooves that run from the lower jaw back to the belly area. The top of the head and lower jaw have bumpy knobs. They are black on the upper side and mottled black and white on the underside, with flippers that range from all white to all black. Flippers are long (between 1/4 and 1/3 of the length of the body), and the tail is up to 18 feet wide, serrated, and pointed at the tips.

**HABITAT:** Humpback whales are found in all of the world's oceans. Most spend summer in temperate and polar waters to feed and winter in tropical waters for mating and calving.

**DIET:** Humpback whales are baleen whales and feed on krill, small crustaceans, and fish.

**REPRODUCTION:** Humpback whales reach sexual maturity between 6 and 10 years of age. Females will bear one calf every 2 to 3 years after a 12-month gestation period. Calves nurse for approximately one year.

**Winter Migration:** The Central North Pacific Stock winters in Hawai'i and migrates to the British Columbia/Alaska area in summer. Humpback whale passes through the Kaiwi channel between Moloka'i and O'ahu and around the Mokapu peninsula from December to April as it heads to its wintering grounds in Alaska. The migration of whales can be seen from Fort Hase, North Beach, and Pyramid Rock Shorelines.

**ECOLOGICAL THREATS:** Whales may be negatively impacted or killed by hooking or entanglement in fishing gear, ship strikes, habitat impacts (reduced water quality and available forage resources), harassment by boats (such as whale watching vessels), and harvest. Acoustic impacts on whales include immediate effects (such as injury and behavioral modification) from exposure to noise from seismic profilers and sonars used in oceanographic research and military operations, as well as construction activities such as pile driving. They also include exposure to rising ambient noise levels, the effects of which are currently not well understood.



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**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) FISHERIES CONSERVATION STRATEGIES:** Conservation strategies include the creation of whale sanctuaries, preserving the moratorium against whaling, mitigation of ship strikes, and responding to whales in distress. Federal regulations prohibit approaching whales within 100 yards in the water and within 1,000 feet above ground level when operating an aircraft.

Water vessels should follow NOAA Fisheries' *Guidelines for Whale Protection and Human Safety* while boating in Hawai'i. Guidelines include maintaining the appropriate distance (100 yards [yds]), passing around whales from behind, stopping the vessel and taking it out of gear if a whale is within the 100-yd buffer of the vessel, notifying other vessels that may not be aware of a whale in their path, and reporting any collisions with whales to NOAA Fisheries. It is illegal to intentionally position your watercraft or jet ski in the path of an approaching whale.

Humpback whales are protected under the MMPA. It was determined in 2016 that the Central North Pacific (Hawaiian archipelago and Johnston Atoll) distinct population segment did not warrant listing under the ESA. Any action that is likely to cause harm or to harass them requires a Letter of Authorization or an Incidental Harassment Authorization from NOAA Fisheries.

**MCBH CONSERVATION MEASURES:** Conservation measures that benefit whales include:

- **Habitat protection and enhancement.** MCBH opportunistically removes marine debris from the water and routinely from land areas within its jurisdiction. Actions are taken to reduce nonpoint source pollution from the land into the sea such as erosion control measures, which reduce damage to offshore habitat.
- **Restrictions within the 500-yd naval defensive sea area at MCBH Kaneohe Bay.** Includes prohibiting entry of commercial fishing and whale watching vessels.
- **Enforcement.** The 500-yd-buffer zone is regularly patrolled for violations to regulations. Marines and civilians are made aware of the regulation to stay 100 yds away from whales in the ocean, which includes not placing a watercraft, jet ski, or kayak in the path of an approaching whale.
- **Interagency cooperation.** MCBH supports NOAA Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary annual island-wide humpback whale count by providing conditional access passes to specific vantage points on Mōkapu Peninsula for NOAA-sponsored volunteers during the last Saturday of the month in January, February, and March.
- **Education and outreach.** Development and distribution of informational material in the form of fact sheets, and pamphlets, and conduct briefings for military personnel and civilians on base, which includes new arrivals, and outreach with volunteers.

## REFERENCES

American Cetacean Society. Humpback Whale Fact Sheet.

NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources. Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*).

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). 1991. *Final Recovery Plan for the Humpback Whale (Megaptera novaeangliae)*.

Prepared by the Humpback Whale Recovery Team for NMFS, Silver Spring, MD. 105 pp. November.

**For more information:** MCBH Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan Update. 2022. Sections 6, 7.1, and 7.4.

## PHOTOS

1. NOAA.