

Entangled subadult humpback whale freed of gear off the Island of Hawai'i

On Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2023, a NOAA-led team of trained responders freed an entangled subadult humpback whale off of Kona near the Kona Airport, in the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. The animal had a life-threatening entanglement of small gauge rope wrapped tightly and embedded around the tailstock with a bundle of gear and two buoys behind the fluke. The location and type of the entanglement meant that the animal would likely not be able to free itself.

The whale was first reported late in the day on Jan. 30 by Ocean Sports off of the Mauna Lani hotel in North Kona on the island of Hawai'i. Due to the time of day no response was possible.

On Jan. 31, Ocean Encounters re-sighted the whale near the Kona Airport, and stood by the animal until responders could arrive.

A trained and well-equipped team on a dedicated Captain Zodiac response vessel left Honokohau harbor at 3:30 p.m. HST to document and assess the animal. After assessment and real-time, offsite consultation with the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary team, the team prepared a hooked knife on the end of a 30-foot carbon-fiber pole to get close enough to make a cut. They proceeded to make calculated cuts to the entangling line, removing two buoys and roughly 100 ft. of line and netting.

The animal is believed to be fully disentangled with some non-wrapping embedded lines that will hopefully be shed over time.

While the animal is no longer entangled, the impacts of the entanglement remain. The animal was in poor condition, emaciated, and suffering physical trauma. However, it now has a much better chance of survival.

The recovered gear will be assessed to determine its origin and use, to better understand the entanglement risk and reduce the threat of future entanglements.

How Can You Help?

Mariners are asked to keep a sharp lookout for whales in distress, but not to approach closely or attempt to assist them. NOAA-authorized responders are the only individuals permitted to assist entangled whales and other marine mammals, in coordination with federal laws. Immediately reporting an entangled or otherwise injured or distressed whale, is the best way to help the animal.

If you see an injured or entangled marine mammal, keep a safe and legal distance and call the statewide NOAA Marine Wildlife Hotline at 888-256-9840 or the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF channel 16 immediately. To report a vessel coming too close to a whale, call the NOAA

Fisheries Enforcement Hotline at 800-853-1964, email respectwildlife@noaa.gov, or call your local DOCARE office.

Revised recommendations for best boating practices around whales, developed jointly by the sanctuary, the State of Hawai'i, and Pacific Whale Foundation, can be found at: <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dobor/boating-with-whales/>. Additional wildlife viewing guidelines, safety tips, and hotlines can be found at <https://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov/visit/recreation.html>.

It is illegal to approach a humpback whale closer than 100 yards by any means by sea or drone and closer than 1,000 feet by aircraft.

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary coordinates large whale entanglement response around much of the Hawaiian Islands, while working closely with and under NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Regional Office and NOAA Fisheries' Office of Protected Resources' MMHSRP and their greater response efforts and national network. NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources provides overall oversight and authorizations. Due to the risks involved for animals and responders alike, large whale entanglement response is a permitted activity under NOAA Fisheries MMHSRP.

A free online course by NOAA and partners provides guidance on how the on-water community can help entangled whales in Hawai'i waters. The U.S. Whale Entanglement Response course helps fishermen, tour boat operators, and whale researchers better assist trained responders to disentangle large whales.