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Volunteers Count Whales in NOAA's Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary

Over 900 volunteers gathered data from the shores of Oahu, Kauai, and the Big Island for Saturday's annual Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary Ocean Count. Participants tallied humpback whale sightings and documented the animals' surface behavior during the survey. The sanctuary, which is managed by NOAA, protects humpback whales and their habitat in Hawaiian waters where they migrate each winter to mate, calve, and nurse their young.

Volunteers collected data from 62 sites statewide. Every 15 minutes, an average of 5 whales were counted per site statewide. The following are the average numbers of whales sighted per 15-minute count period on each of the islands:

O'ahu – 4 whales
Kaua'i – 6 whales
Big Island – 4 whales

Scientific studies have shown that Hawaii's humpback whale population has been increasing at an annual rate of approximately seven percent. Over time, data from the Sanctuary Ocean Count can be used to corroborate these findings. Hawaiian waters provide critical breeding habitat for approximately two-thirds of the north Pacific stock of humpback whales.

"With perfect weather conditions, a record number of volunteers statewide and a remarkable amount of whale activity, Saturday's event was an exciting kick-off to the 2011 season" said Claire Kavanaugh, sanctuary ocean count project coordinator. "The Ocean Count project provides a unique opportunity for the public to learn about Hawaii's humpbacks while participating in a monitoring effort. Many volunteers that try out the project come back year after year. It is easy to get hooked on watching Hawaii's humpbacks."

Weather conditions were excellent for viewing humpback whales around the state. Other marine wildlife seen during the Sanctuary Ocean Count included Hawaiian monk seals, sea turtles, spinner dolphins, and a variety of sea birds.

Two more Sanctuary Ocean Counts are scheduled to take place on Saturday, February 26 and March 26. For more information on becoming a Sanctuary Ocean Count volunteer visit sanctuaryoceancount.org or contact the appropriate sanctuary office. On the Big Island, call 1-888-55-WHALE ext. 253. On Oahu, call 397-2651 ext. 253. On Kauai, call 1-808-246-2860. A whale count on Maui is conducted independently by the Pacific Whale Foundation each February.

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On the Web:

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary: <http://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov>