



Contact: Christine Brammer
(808) 397-2651 ext. 252
or (808) 224-6444

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

More than 800 volunteers counted whales and gathered data from the shores of O'ahu, 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 59 sites statewide. The following are the average numbers of whales sighted per 15-minute count period on each of the islands:

O'ahu – **3** whales

Kaua'i – **2** whales

Big Island – **6** whales

As many as 10,000 humpback whales winter in state waters. 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.

"Today's count was a great success with over 800 volunteers participating," said Christine Brammer, sanctuary ocean count 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 come back year after year. It is easy to get hooked on watching Hawaii's humpbacks."

Despite some challenging weather conditions at a number of sites, volunteers were still successful at viewing many humpback whales performing a variety of behaviors. Other marine wildlife seen during the 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 27 and March 27. 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 O'ahu, call 397-2651 ext. 253. On Kaua'i, call 1-808-246-2860. A whale count on Maui is conducted independently by the Pacific Whale Foundation.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.

On the Web:

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