

Community Announcement

March 16, 2022

Entangled adult male humpback freed of gear off Maui

Joint Statement from NOAA Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary and NOAA Fisheries

On Tuesday, March 15, 2022, a NOAA-led team of trained responders freed an entangled male humpback whale just outside Ma'alaea, Maui, in the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. The adult animal had a life-threatening entanglement of heavy gauge line wrapped tightly around his head in front of his pectoral flippers, which would prevent feeding. The location of the entanglement, and size and type of line (a poly blend), meant that the animal would likely not be able to free itself.

The whale was first reported on March 13 by a Blue Water Maui tour vessel. NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) monitored the animal until the Ultimate Whale Watch response vessel, *Aloha Kai*, arrived to assess the entanglement. Unfortunately, the animal was lost among the many whales in the area before a disentanglement could be launched.

On March 15, PacWhale Eco-Adventures' *Ocean Voyager* sighted the whale and hailed the sanctuary's research vessel, *Koholā*, which was already on the water collecting humpback whale population health data. The multi-agency Pacific Islands Large Whale Entanglement Response Team mounted an authorized response.

Trained network members aboard Pacific Whale Foundation's *Ocean Protector* provided monitoring and safety support. The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa - Marine Mammal Research Program provided drone support, to help document and assess the entanglement and animal, and on several occasions was instrumental in re-locating the entangled animal.

Responders aboard *Koholā* prepared a hooked knife on the end of a 30-foot carbon-fiber pole to get close enough to make a cut. After several approaches, the team was able to free the whale. The gear was recovered and determined to be 21 feet of 7/8" diameter, 3-strand, poly-blend line. The recovered gear will be investigated to determine its origin and use to better understand the entanglement risk and its impacts in order to reduce the threat.

The response team for both sightings included Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, Pacific Whale Foundation, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa - Marine Mammal Research Program, Cardinal Point Captains, the Ultimate Whale Watch trained response team, NOAA OLE, and Trilogy Excursions. Shoreside support was provided by NOAA Fisheries, NOAA Corps, and the state of Hawai'i Division of Aquatic Resources.

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. Only trained and well-equipped responders who are authorized under a Marine Mammal Protection Act/Endangered Species Act permit issued to NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program ([MMHSRP](#)) are permitted to assist

entangled whales and other marine mammals. 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 were recently announced jointly by the sanctuary and the State of Hawai'i and 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 disentangle large whales.

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