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NOAA Reports Health of Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary

A new NOAA report on the health of humpback whales within the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary evaluates resources protected by the sanctuary. The status of humpback whales is rated as “good/fair”; however, their health is rated as “fair.”

Although humpback whale population numbers are increasing in the sanctuary, their overall health rating is “fair” because of an increase in reported collisions, entanglements and associated impacts.

Entanglement and whale-vessel collisions have been widely identified as the primary human cause of mortality for humpback whales, both in Hawai‘i and around the world. Therefore, these two issues have been identified as immediate and pressing issues for the sanctuary.

“The sanctuary was designated to protect humpback whales and their habitat in Hawai‘i, and this report reaffirms why humpbacks need protection,” said Allen Tom, Pacific Islands Regional Director for the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. “It also reveals that adaptive management strategies are necessary in order to preserve the sanctuary today and into the future.”

Prepared by NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary Condition Report provides an important baseline for the status of sanctuary resources at the beginning of the management plan review process.

Water quality in the sanctuary as it relates to humpback whales appears to be in “good” to “good/fair” condition because it is not likely to pose a threat to humpback whales. This is because most water quality issues occur in nearshore waters, where humpback whales do not frequent. Also, humpback whales do not feed while wintering in Hawaiian waters, avoiding risks from consumption of potential pollutants.

Habitats used by humpback whales in the sanctuary are in "good/fair" condition. Although humpback whale habitat remains widely available in the Hawaiian Islands, some preferred habitats could be removed due to offshore development activities.

This condition report also includes the most up-to-date information from the North Pacific-wide research project, Structure of Populations, Levels of Abundance and Status of Humpbacks (SPLASH). SPLASH is the most comprehensive humpback whale research study ever undertaken for any population of whales.

The primary objectives are to improve the description of the stock structure of humpback whales in the North Pacific to better understand the population over time, and to assess the human impact on whales. The sanctuary played a central role in initiating, funding and coordinating this cooperative international project.

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary was created by Congress in 1992 and was fully established in 1997 with the approval of the sanctuary's first management plan. The sanctuary is administered by the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in partnership with the State of Hawai'i's Department of Land and Natural Resources.

The management plan for the sanctuary was last revised in 2002. The sanctuary is currently engaged in a multi-year process with many opportunities for public participation to review and revise the current management plan. In August 2010, the sanctuary will hold public comment meetings statewide.

NOAA prepared the condition report in consultation with outside experts from the scientific community. The full report is available online:
<http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/condition/>

Encompassing 1,370 square miles of federal and state waters surrounding the main Hawaiian Islands, the sanctuary extends from the shoreline to the 100-fathom isobath (600-foot depth) and is composed of five separate marine protected areas accessible from six of the eight main Hawaiian Islands. Through management, resource protection, education, outreach, research and cultural activities, the sanctuary strives to protect humpback whales and their habitat in Hawai'i.

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