

Canadian Pacific Humpback Collaboration

Highest number of Humpback Whales recorded to date in the Salish Sea

Increased awareness and caution needed - even in winter.

December 14, 2022

In 2022, at least 396 individual Humpback Whales were documented in the Salish Sea. This includes 34 mothers with their first-year calves. This number has increased from 293 Humpback Whales being documented in the same area only five years ago in 2017.

This is the **highest number of Humpback Whales documented in one year in the Salish Sea** since records have been kept, as reported by Tasli Shaw, project lead for [Humpback Whales of the Salish Sea](#) (HWSS). HWSS collates sightings from researchers, ecotourism captains and naturalists, and additional citizen scientists.

These efforts from the Salish Sea feed into the province-wide cataloguing of Humpback Whales by the [Canadian Pacific Humpback Collaboration](#), a consortium of organizations that share data to reduce threats to Humpback Whales in BC waters.

This “Humpback comeback” is remarkable, considering commercial whaling in British Columbia ended only 55 years ago and the benefits of the whales’ presence are far-reaching.

This happy news is being shared to highlight the importance of the **collaborative approach to documenting Humpback Whales**, and to protecting them from anthropogenic threats such as entanglement in fishing gear and increasing shipping traffic. Greater vigilance and knowledge are needed, and these are needed year-round.

There appears to be a misconception that Humpbacks are just passing through the Salish Sea. Rather, many of the whales return to the same, specific areas to feed year-after-year and stay for months at a time. Humpback Whales are also still present in the winter off the coast of British Columbia. Some have not yet left on their migration to the warm-water breeding grounds of Hawaii, Mexico or Central America.

Of the 396 Humpback Whales documented this year, most of them have been seen in the Salish Sea in previous years, indicating that they have clear preferences for where they choose to feed. As an example, “Monarch”, who is known to researchers as BCZ0180, has returned to these busy feeding grounds for 20 years in a row and is often still feeding in the Salish Sea in winter.

“The Salish Sea is a place where many Humpback Whales have learned to find food and how best to capture it”, says Tasli Shaw of HWSS. “There seems to be a public misconception that Humpbacks simply migrate through this area. We see the highest number of sightings in the fall, and it is the same whales year-after-year who we see socializing, feeding, and resting within the waters of the Salish Sea.”

Another unfortunate misconception appears to be that Humpback Whales would change their behaviour to avoid approaching vessels. But, Humpbacks are often oblivious of boats and fishing gear. They do not have the biosonar of toothed whales and are very focussed on feeding while in the waters of British Columbia. They often stay in one area and surface in unpredictable patterns. They may also be sleeping or nursing just below the surface.

It is difficult to know how many Humpback Whales die from vessel strike and entanglement because dead whales often sink. This emphasizes the importance of the knowledge gained from investigating dead whales who wash ashore (conducting necropsies) and of the research to see how many survivors have scars from entanglement and/or vessel strike.

“The Salish Sea has become the whale equivalent of a busy school zone”, shared Lisa Spaven for Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s CeMoRe program. “Our monthly surveys show that whales are present in all months throughout the region, making the Salish Sea an area of considerable year-round overlap between whales and both commercial and recreational vessel traffic and fishing.”

Slowing down, increasing vigilance and distance from the whales, and understanding Humpback Whale behaviour can reduce threats.

“We are so fortunate to have a second chance with Humpback Whales” stated Jackie Hildering representing the Canadian Pacific Humpback Collaboration. “Their presence is a reminder that we can rapidly change our values and actions to not only benefit species, but whole ecosystems. Humpback Whales fertilize the ocean, leading to more food, more oxygen production and more absorption of carbon dioxide.”

For Regulations and best practices see www.SeeABlowGoSlow.org.

Call the DFO Marine Mammal Incident Reporting Line at 1-800-465-4336 to report dead, entangled, or injured marine mammals in British Columbia, or violations of the Marine Mammal Regulations.

For media inquiries and access to the media pack:

jackie@mersociety.org

Background:

Humpback Whales of the Salish Sea (HWSS)

HWSS is a photo identification project, dedicated to better understanding the Humpback Whales documented within the Salish Sea and western entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait. Sightings are collated from researchers including Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), members of the Pacific Whale Watch Association, and additional citizen scientists. HWSS is a collaborator in the province-wide cataloguing effort of the Canadian Pacific Humpback Collaboration.

Canadian Pacific Humpback Collaboration (CPHC)

The CPHC catalogues Humpback Whales off the coast of British Columbia. The CPHC's centralized catalogue and database of individual Humpback Whales enables understanding of the whales' habitat use, population size and structure, life histories, and the impacts of threats like vessel strike and entanglement.

Members of the Collaboration are Humpback Whales of the Salish Sea, the Marine Education and Research Society (coordinators of the CPHC), North Coast Cetacean Society, Pacific Wildlife Foundation, North Coast Cetacean Research Initiative – Ocean Wise Conservation Association, Keta Coastal Conservation, and Whales of Clayoquot & Barkley.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) maintained a province-wide catalogue of Humpback Whales off Canada's Pacific Coast up to 2010. Members of the CPHC were among those who contributed data to DFO and ensured cataloguing of Humpbacks continued beyond 2010. DFO supports and contributes Humpback Whale cataloguing data to the CPHC.

Cetacean Monitoring and Research (CeMoRe) Project, Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Since 2020, CeMoRe has been focussed on investigating the current seasonal distribution, abundance and behaviour of whales in the Southern Salish Sea, in and around the vessel traffic lanes leading to and from Vancouver and Seattle. Data from monthly boat-based line transect surveys, tags, and acoustic monitoring are being used to inform vessel strike vulnerability of cetaceans in the region.