



Effort being made to save endangered whales

Preventing death by ships the goal

By Zeke Barlow
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For an hour, nothing but dolphins and sea lions broke the surface of the ocean as Tom Evans gazed down from his airplane. But the California Department of Fish and Game pilot wasn't interested in those marine mammals. He was looking for something bigger — much bigger.

Suddenly, a flash of white caught Evans' eye and he banked his plane hard to the left, chasing what he thought was the plume from the world's largest animal, the blue whale.

Ben Waltenberger, who's mapping whales traveling through the Santa Barbara Channel, scanned the ocean, ready to mark his map. Turns out, Evans saw a wave's white cap, not a whale.

"I thought it was a whale, but it was a wolf," Evans joked.

The two are part of a larger network of pilots, ship captains, scientists and volunteers trying to map whales passing through the channel in an effort to avoid a repeat of last year, when four blue whales and one fetus were struck and killed by ships.

From 1980 to 1987, there were only five blue whale deaths off the California coast.

"We recognize that whales will always come back to this region, and there are more and more ships every year and this threat isn't going away," said Sean Hastings, resource protection coordinator for the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. "It's time to get coordinated."

11-page game plan drafted

Since last year's deaths — dubbed an "unusual mortality event" — the Channel Islands Sanctuary Advisory Council has drafted an 11-page game plan to monitor the whales in the channel and alert ships to their presence.

Although there have been efforts to keep tabs on the migrating mammals in the past, this is the largest, most organized endeavor.

The venture is designated to protect not only blue whales but also other endangered whales — humpback, sei, sperm and northern right — that pass through the channel. The channel also has annual migrations of grays, orcas and other kinds of whales.

The first step is determining when to start the monitoring process. Now, when five or more endangered whales are spotted in one day by a network of volunteers, biologists and whale-watching groups, weekly

aerial surveys will begin.

Waltenberger will then hop on a plane owned by one of the many partner agencies working with the sanctuary and scan the 60 miles of the mile-wide northbound and southbound shipping lanes from Anacapa Island to Point Conception. When he, or any of the other people looking, sees five or more whales, an alert will go out to the ships asking captains to slow down and watch for whales.

At least 15 container ships move through the channel a day, cruising at speeds of around 18 knots, about 21 mph. Hastings said that having the ships slow down can mean the difference between an injury and a fatality if a whale collides with a boat.

Although the admonishments are only requests to slow down and they carry no consequences, officials said the captains will pay attention.

"Last year was a real tragedy, and we are trying to stop the tragedy this year, and this is putting people on alert for the time being," said Dick McKenna, captain for the Marine Exchange, which works as a kind of traffic cop for the ships using the ports in Long Beach and Los Angeles. "Mariners go to sea because they love the sea, and part of loving the sea is loving what is in it. It's not like people are running around looking to knock out whales."

Once the whales are seen in the shipping lanes, a map and information about where the whales are goes out to ships leaving the ports, along with the request to slow to 12 knots.

Effectiveness questioned

The system is loosely based on the structure that firefighters use when battling large fires: An incident command is established where all participants report and from which information is disseminated.

But not everyone agrees that it is enough.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed suit against the U.S. Coast Guard in June, claiming that not enough was being done to protect blue whales.

"It's certainly good that there is some effort to counter this, but unless you get some more concrete measures in place, I'm not sure how effective that is to keep whales from being killed," said Andrea Treece, an attorney with the group.

First of many steps

Hastings said this year's plan of action is the first of many steps in the next few years.

A researcher with Scripps Institution of Oceanography is studying how noise from ships affects whales.

An additional scientist is attempting to tag whales as they move through the channel in an effort to understand the elusive creatures.

More work is being done to understand all the factors that contribute to drawing the whales here in the first place, including the food source, water temperatures and ocean floor topography.

Other monitoring techniques are being looked into for the future, including real-time warnings for ships

of whales' locations.



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