Queensland Government Department of Environment and Science

Rules for watching marine mammals

There are a number of rules that are in place to make sure marine mammals can live naturally in Queensland waters without being disturbed, while at the same time allowing us to watch them in safety.

An explanation of these rules is provided below. A full description of these regulations can be found on the Office of Queensland Parliamentary Counsel website. Penalties apply.

Approach distances for whales and dolphins

Approach distances reduce the risk of disturbing whales or dolphins. They apply to boats, prohibited vessels (including jet skis and hovercraft), aircraft (including helicopters) and people who are in the water.

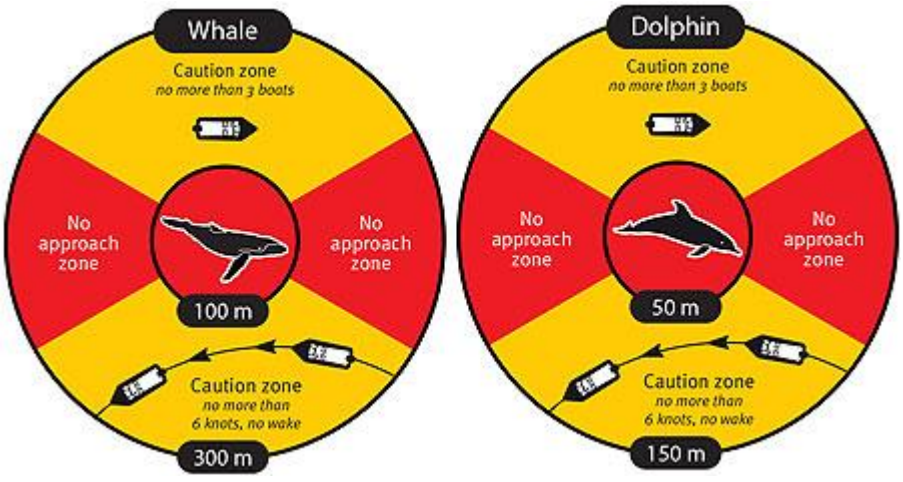
Approach distances for dugongs only apply where a Special Management Declaration has been made.

Approach distances are divided into caution zones and no approach zones.

Caution zones

The 'caution' zone is an area surrounding a whale or dolphin in which boats cannot travel at speeds of more than six knots or speeds that create a wake. The caution zone extends out 300 metres from a whale, and 150 metres for a dolphin.

No approach zones



Within a caution zone there are areas designated as 'no approach' zones that boats cannot enter. These are the areas closest to an animal and directly in front of and behind an animal. For a whale, the no approach zone surrounds the animal for 100 metres and extends 300 metres in front of and behind the animal. For dolphins, the no approach zone surrounds the animal for 50 metres and extends 150 metres in front of and behind the animal.

Something to think about...

A fully loaded semi-trailer weighs 36 tonnes. A fully-grown humpback whale weighs up to 45 tonnes. You wouldn't stand in front of a moving semi-trailer, so why would you put your boat in the way of a whale?

The '3-boat rule'

A boat cannot enter a caution zone if three boats are already present within the caution zone of an animal. If there are boats waiting to enter a caution zone, boats inside the zone should 'share the water' by moving away after they have had an opportunity to watch a whale or a dolphin.

When a marine mammal approaches a boat

If a whale approaches a boat so that the boat is within the caution zone, the boat must not operate at a speed more than six knots or at a speed that creates a wake. If a whale approaches a boat so that the boat is within the no approach zone, the operator of the boat must turn its engines off or disengage its gears, or withdraw from the no approach zone at a speed that is less than six knots and doesn't create a wake.

If a dolphin approaches a boat within the caution zone or the no approach zone, a moving boat can continue on its way as long as any change in speed or direction is made gradually in a way that is unlikely to disturb the dolphin, particularly if it is bow riding. The boat may even slow down or stop to watch the dolphin providing it does so in a way that does not disturb it.

When a marine mammal appears disturbed

If a marine mammal shows signs of disturbance (e.g. acting in an aggressive manner, changing its breathing patterns) a boat must withdraw beyond the caution zone at a speed that is not more than six knots so as to not create a wake.

Other situations where specific approach distances apply

Specific approach distances also apply for the following:

- 'prohibited' vessels (e.g. jet skis and hovercraft): not within 300 metres of a whale or a dolphin
- a person: entering the water to approach a whale within 100 metres or a dolphin within 50 metres
- aircraft: not within 300 metres of a whale or a dolphin
- helicopter: not within 500 metres of a whale or a dolphin, and no hovering above a marine mammal.

In the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and other Commonwealth waters, boats must not come within 300 metres of a whale calf or within 150 metres of a dolphin calf. If a calf appears, causing a boat to be within a no approach zone, the boat should stop with the engines turned off or the gears disengaged, or the boat should withdraw at a slow, constant speed.

Special Management Declarations

The Special Management Declaration framework gives marine mammals additional protection when it is required and provides a flexible and streamlined management tool for responding quickly to situations where marine mammals are under threat.

Special Management Declarations can be either temporary or permanent and made for animals (special management marine mammal declarations) or areas (special management area declarations) that need to be given greater protection or require additional management.

At present there are two permanent Special Management Declarations. One has been made declaring Migaloo and other humpback whales that are more than 90% white to be special management marine mammals. This means boats and prohibited vessels cannot approach within 500 metres of a predominantly white whale and aircraft cannot approach within 610 metres.

Special Management Declarations can be made in different situations including when:

- an animal is at risk of stranding
- a calf becomes separated from its mother or group
- a female marine mammal is about to, or has recently, given birth
- dugongs need additional protection to help them recover from habitat loss when their usual seagrass feeding area has been damaged or destroyed by a natural disaster.

General boating regulations around marine mammals

Please follow these general rules to protect marine mammals:

- Never restrict the path of a marine mammal or cause it to change direction.
- Never drive a boat into a pod or herd of marine mammals causing it to divide into smaller groups.
- Do not deposit rubbish near, make a loud or sudden noise near, or attempt to touch or feed a marine mammal, unless it is part of an authorised dolphin feeding program.

Report any sick, injured or dead marine mammals or marine turtles by contacting the RSPCA Queensland 1300 ANIMAL (1300 264 625).

Last updated

8 August 2016

Excerpt from the website below:

https://environment.des.qld.gov.au/wildlife/watching/marine-mammals/rules.html