

Comment by: Amber Himes
Public Comment Period – National Ocean Policy

I'm here representing the Orca Relief Citizen's Alliance, a non-profit organization located on San Juan Island. Killer whales have always been a very important part of the Puget Sound ecosystem and important to the people that live here. Within the last 5 years we have lost 20% of the whales in our local waters. Now we only have 78 whales left. There are three factors which contribute to the decline to: the presence of toxins in our waters such as PCBs, the decrease in available prey, and the increase in the number of whale watching boats. Of these three factors, the first two factors are issues that need to be addressed over the long term. It is not something that we can take care of within the next year or two. Whale watching, however, is something that can be addressed now.

Orca Relief has funded three scientific studies within the last year and a half which point toward whale watching being the most important factor causing the decline in our whales. One of the studies found that the noise from boat engines can decrease detection of prey from 95 to 99% as the whales' echolocation is impaired. The second study showed that energy consumption has increased by almost 20% between the non-whale watching days in the 1980s, compared to today. The third study looked at all possible factors that could contribute to whale decline – food abundance, environmental variation, scientific darting, and whale watching. Whale watching statistically had the highest correlation with the decrease in killer whale population. To sum it up, all three studies showed that whale watching vessels have highly negative impacts on the whales, which contribute to their decline.

We MUST do something now in order to decrease the stress put on these animals. Presently, our only option is to decrease the number of boats following the whales on a daily basis. Over the last 6 years, the number of commercial whale watching boats has doubled to more than 80 boats. Including private boats that are out on the water too, this leads to more boats on the water than there are whales IN the water. We are requesting very rigid whale watching guidelines which also provide the whales with boat free time.

Drastic measures must be taken IMMEDIATELY in order to secure the survival of the few animals we have left. If you have any questions regarding our scientific findings and any other information on orcas, please contact us at Orca Relief.

Key points:

- Killer whales have always been an important part of the Puget Sound ecosystem and important to the people that live here
- Southern resident population down 20% from 97 to 78
- Number of commercial whale watching boats doubled from 1994 to 2001 from 40 to 80....on top of that are private boats
- Commonly thought problems: prey availability, pollution (PCB), whale watching

Cant quickly do anything about prey or pollution so should do something about whale watching

- New whale watching guidelines
- If the orca is listed under ESA...need to figure out what to do so the population is not in trouble