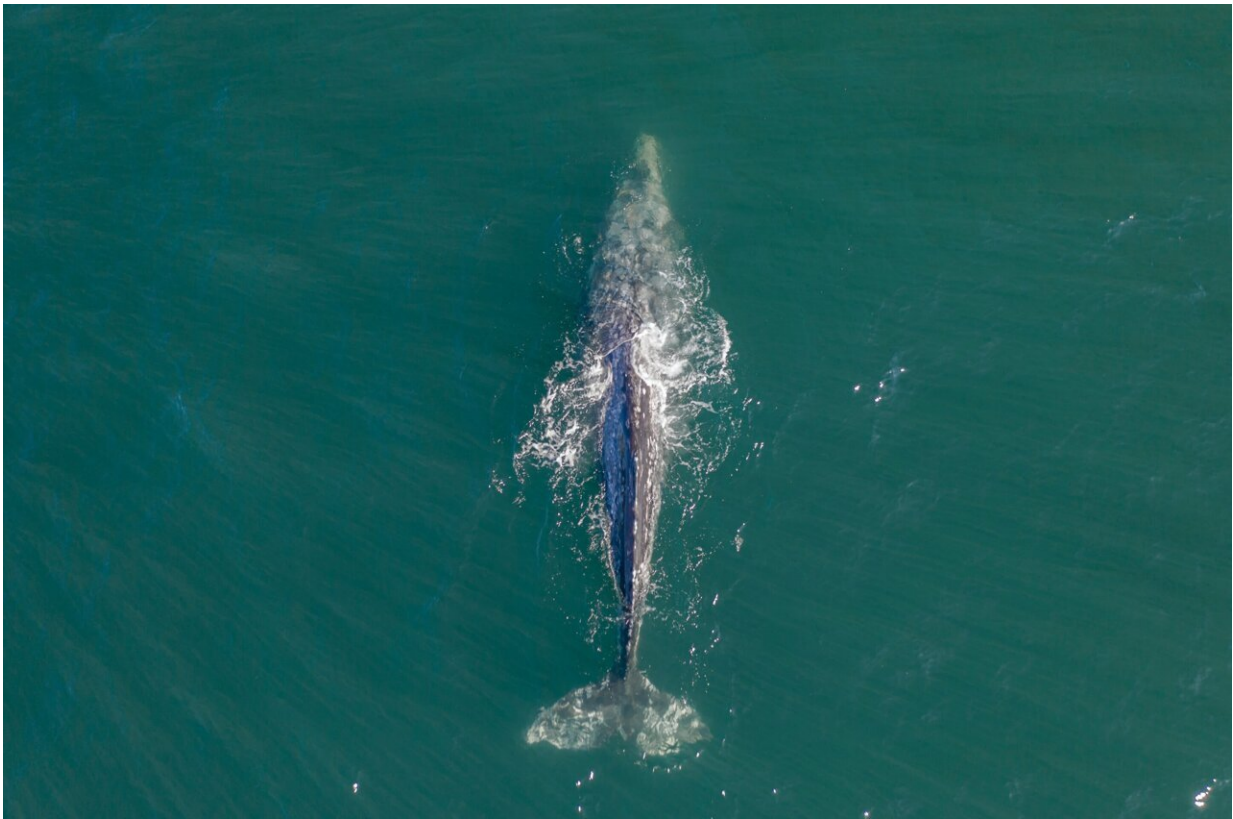


Coast Guard launches 'traffic control for whales' in Washington State's Puget Sound

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Joe Gaydos remembers the beautiful minke whale that washed up on the shore of a San Juan Island in 2022. Illuminated by a pink and orange sunrise, its injuries were consistent with a fatal strike.

"It was very clear that that whale was T-boned by the bow of a ship," said Gaydos, science director for the SeaDoc Society, a science and education nonprofit based on Orcas Island. "It just broke my heart."

On Wednesday, the U.S. Coast Guard celebrated the launch of a new four-year pilot program, dubbed the "Cetacean Desk," that intends to keep whales and vessels safely apart, and reduce underwater racket. It acts like air traffic control, but for whales, in the busy waterways of the Salish Sea, which has seen a resurgence of marine mammals.

Modeled after Canada's Marine Mammal Desk, the Coast Guard hub is intended to give mariners near [real-time data](#) about the location of whales through the existing WhaleReport Alert System.

A flat-screen mounted on a wall of the Coast Guard's Seattle vessel communications center Wednesday was speckled with blue dots along the channels and straights of the Salish Sea.

These dots represent whale sighting reports over the past 24 hours, and are entered by Coast Guard staff on the desk, or automatically populate with reports from two apps—WhaleReport or Whale Alert—or through the Orca Network web form, sightings@orcaneetwork.org, or 866-672-2638. Anyone—whale watchers from the shore or recreational boaters—can use these tools to report sightings.

Mariners can access the map, and receive notification from the Coast Guard to help them know when to slow down or change course.

Officials hope the program will reduce ship strikes and underwater noise, helping protect at-risk and endangered whale species from the disruption in their hunting, communication and potentially deadly strikes. And the data collected will be available for researchers who track whales' migration patterns.

Gaydos said he's come across both the endangered salmon-eating killer whales and mammal-eating killer whales with propeller strikes on their bodies. The ships' underwater noise masks the same sonic sweet spot orcas use to hunt and communicate.

Since the program soft launched Dec. 23, the Cetacean Desk has logged 11 whale sightings from mariners, a Coast Guard official wrote in an email.

While giving a tour of the desk, Commander Margaret Woodbridge, who is managing the pilot program, said reports rose 585% when the desk launched and now that the reporting system receives sightings from the apps. Officials expect the number to increase with Wednesday's official opening ceremony and with public outreach.

Officials say the pilot program is the first of its kind in the nation. The Cetacean Desk, complete with a small blue placard identifying the desk and five monitors, is embedded within the Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service and operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Coast Guard personnel, some donning headsets, blue jumpsuits and black boots, sit or stand at other similar desks in the same room. They touch base with mariners entering the Salish Sea and can share reports of whale sightings with the Cetacean Desk.

The number 206-217-6722 (ORCA) rings an old school landline sitting at the Cetacean Desk. The desk takes reports by phone or on the designated traffic channels (5A, 14). Mariners need to provide the vessel name, whale species sighted, number of animals, and direction of travel and any behavior observed.

The Coast Guard plans to share whale reports with the U.S. Navy, and eventually begin tracking whales' movement using hydrophones and

through infrared, Woodbridge said. Currently much of the reporting depends on visibility and daylight.

The map sharing whale sighting reports is only available to "vetted" users, to prevent recreational and whale watching boats from racing over and harassing whales. The Coast Guard is saving the sighting data indefinitely for use in research.

The [pilot program](#) was authorized, developed and implemented through the Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022, in a partnership between federal and international agencies, the Makah, Port Gamble S'Klallam, and Lummi tribal nations, local and state entities and scientists.

"What's important in all of this is beginning to recognize how diverse the Pacific Northwest is and how we depend on each other," said G. Chad Bowechop, vice chairman for the Makah Tribe.

U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell authored the portion of the legislation that created the program.

"We're standing just a few hundred yards from Puget Sound, an economic and ecological engine for our region," Cantwell said. " ... In this approach we can keep our economy moving and we can keep whales moving too."

The Coast Guard monitored an estimated 298,000 vessel transits through inland waters between Washington and B.C. in 2023. Researchers believe many ship strikes go unreported, the whales sinking to the bottom along with the story of what killed them.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration officials say the strikes are rare.

At least two humpbacks have been inadvertently struck and killed by Washington State Ferries.

The revival of marine mammals in the Salish Sea has excluded the endangered southern resident orcas.

While ship traffic can negatively impact many at-risk whale species in the Puget Sound region, with underwater noise disrupting hunting and communication and vessel strikes causing injury or death, the southern residents are particularly vulnerable.

Researchers have found two-thirds of southern resident pregnancies end in loss because of a lack of food. More recently, studies have found the southern resident females have less hunting success than their neighbors up north and that the shrinking, increasingly inbred population of southern residents could be plummeting toward extinction.

"It's heartening to see the progress that we've made in addressing these threats in the last few years," said Laura Blackmore, executive director of the Puget Sound Partnership. "But we know that we still have work to do to help the southern residents thrive."

Blackmore said the Puget Sound Partnership requested \$200,000 for the first fiscal year of the program. Cantwell said she hopes the program is reauthorized and contributes valuable data to better understand how to make the Salish Sea quieter and safer for whales.

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