

Humpback Whale Conger
(BCY0728), photo ©MERS,
Marine Mammal License MML-57

Summary Report:

Preliminary Findings from a Survey of Recreational Boaters' Knowledge of Laws and Best Practices with Marine Mammals in British Columbia

Prepared for: The Marine Education and Research Society | Prepared by: Elayne McIvor, Catalyst Consulting

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Canada



Elayne McIvor (MPH, CE),
Catalyst Consulting

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Bigg's Killer Whales T060s, photo ©MERS,
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Background

The Marine Education and Research Society (MERS) is dedicated to promoting conservation and understanding of marine ecosystems through scientific research, environmental education, and marine wildlife response. In alignment with their educational activities, MERS launched a campaign called “[See a Blow? Go Slow!](#)” in 2014 to educate recreational boaters about the return of large whales to coastal waters, the Marine Mammal Regulations in Canada, how to avoid collisions with marine mammals, and what to do if collision or entanglement occurs. In 2023 the organization commissioned a coast-wide survey of recreational boaters to assess the effectiveness of this educational campaign, as well as boaters’ general knowledge of the laws and best practices for safe and responsible boating around marine mammals off the coast in British Columbia (BC).

This summary report summarizes preliminary results obtained in the survey, as well as key recommendations for MERS and their partners to consider moving forward.

Methods

Data was collected through a coast-wide survey of recreational boaters. To be eligible to participate in the survey, respondents had to be recreational boaters who regularly operated, or were passengers, on motorized or non-motorized recreational vessels off the coast of BC in the last 5 years. The survey was live for roughly 8-months, from July 7, 2023 to February 25, 2024. A total of 3,953 eligible survey responses were obtained.

Key Findings

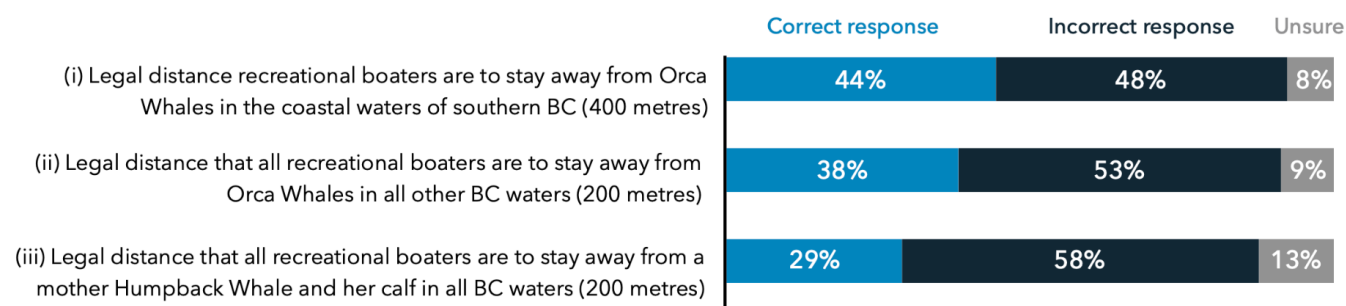
Who did we hear from?

Most of the recreational boaters we heard from in the survey primarily act as boat operators (57%), either operate motorized vessels under 8 metres (32%) or self-propelled vessels (31%), have more than 10 years of boating experience (57%), primarily boat around the Southeast (54%) and/or Northeast of Vancouver Island (36%), and have their Pleasure Craft Operator Card (65%).

To what extent do recreational boaters understand the laws and best practices?

Overall, survey findings show that the majority of responding recreational boaters are generally familiar with the boating laws and best practices around marine mammals in BC coastal waters, with variability in comprehension for each area assessed. The majority could identify the Whale Warning Flag, understand the Marine Mammal Regulations, purposes of the DFO Incident Reporting Line, Humpback behaviours, how to reduce disturbances around marine mammals, and why it is important to note remove fishing gear/rope from entangled whales. However, findings show that smaller proportions know the legal distances to stay away from different marine mammals in different areas (29% to 44%) (Figure 1) and have reported sightings or marine mammals and/or violations of the laws before (21%). Similarly, nearly half of the respondents incorrectly believed that Humpbacks migrate to warm water to feed (40%).

Figure 1. Proportion of respondents that correctly identified legal distances to stay away from different marine mammals in BC coastal waters (N=3,711; 3,709; 3,711)



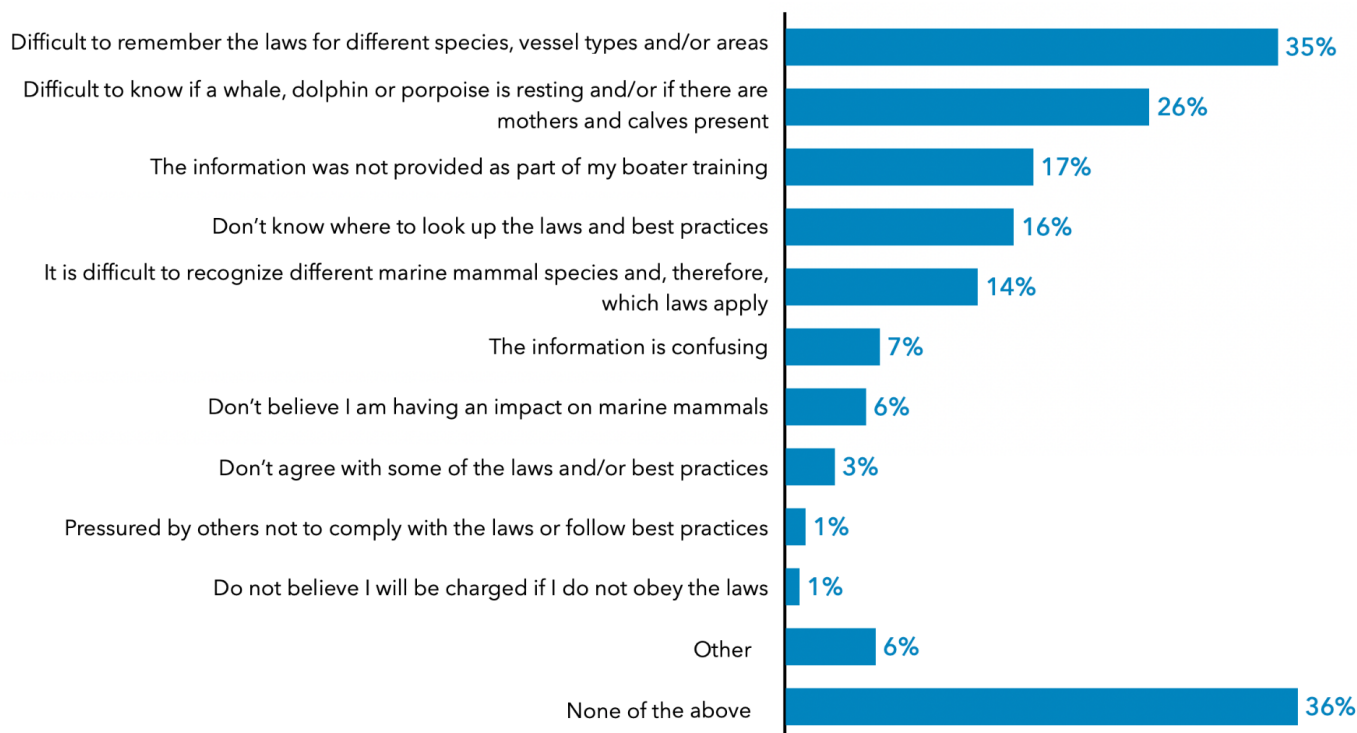
What are the key barriers to following the laws and best practices?

Figure 2 illustrates factors that influence respondents' adherence to boating laws and best practices around marine mammals. The top 5 barriers to following the laws and best practices were found to be:

1. Difficulty remembering the laws for different species, vessel types and/or areas (35%)
2. Difficulty knowing if a whale, dolphin, or porpoise is resting and/or if there are mothers and calves present (26%)
3. The information not being provided as part of respondents' boater training (17%)
4. Not knowing where to look up the laws and best practices (16%)
5. Difficulty recognizing different marine mammal species and, therefore, which laws apply (14%)

Interestingly, relatively small proportions of respondents (6% or less) indicated that they disagreed with the laws/best practices, intentionally evade them, or that they do not believe they have an impact on marine mammals. Other key barriers to following the laws and best practices were: default to using common sense strategies to respect/protect marine mammals and difficulty applying/interpreting the rules (e.g., difficulty judging distances over water, where whale safe zones start and end, distinguishing between SRKW vs. transients).

Figure 2. Respondents' report of barriers to adhering to boating laws and best practices around marine mammals (N=3,382)



How effective was the 'See a Blow? Go Slow!' campaign?



Survey results also show that the 'See a Blow? Go Slow!' campaign reached a large audience, with two-thirds of the respondents indicating that they had seen or heard the campaign before (66%). They primarily recalled seeing the campaign on signage at marinas/boat ramps (74%) and/or on social media (42%). The campaign was also successful in increasing the majority of viewers' knowledge about boater safety and laws/best practices around marine mammals (87%), either 'definitely' (52%) or 'somewhat' (35%).

Recommendations

Based on survey findings, the following recommendations have been put forward for consideration by MERS and their partners to help recreational boaters operate in a way that reduces threats to marine mammals and human safety.

1. Continue to develop and implement strategies to educate recreational boaters

While findings generally show that most respondents are aware of the laws and best practices for boating around marine mammals in BC, there is still room to improve their understanding. Future educational activities implemented by MERS and their partners should be responsive to key findings from the survey, such as focusing on content that is less understood, addressing barriers to adherence, and building upon successes of the 'See a Blow? Go Slow Campaign'. MERS could also tailor future educational outreach to different groups by assessing how responding boater demographics impact their knowledge of the laws and best practices.

2. Consider advocating for the laws and best practices to be simplified

Survey results illustrated that the boating laws around marine mammals in BC are confusing, as well as difficult to remember and apply in real-world scenarios given the need to contextually assess situations. MERS could consider advocating for the rules to be simplified and consolidated to support adherence.

3. Continue to disseminate survey findings

Continue to disseminate survey findings to key partners and audiences given their broad applicability and opportunity to inform future educational efforts for recreational boaters in BC.