



## Media Release

July 2, 2025 | Port McNeill, BC  
Territory of the Kwakwaka'wakw

### New Whale-Safe Boating Course Launches to Increase Safety for Boaters and Marine Mammals

Port McNeill, BC – Today, the Marine Education and Research Society (MERS) launched the *Whale-Safe Boating course*. This free, comprehensive resource **fulfills a critical need by addressing the safety of BOTH marine mammals and boaters** — whether operating motorized or unmotorized vessels.

The course is aimed at helping boaters stay safe, understand and follow the law, and contribute to marine conservation—while enhancing their enjoyment of British Columbia's spectacular marine environment.

MERS, a team of marine educators and whale researchers, has witnessed firsthand the urgent need for increased boater education. There have been serious human injuries and property losses due to collisions with whales, including incidents where a boater was paralyzed, kayaks were flipped, and motorized vessels were disabled. These incidents pose an equally serious threat to marine mammals.

From Caitlin Birdsall, MERS Executive Director:

*"The Whale-Safe Boating course builds on our See a Blow? Go Slow! campaign, which we launched in 2014 in response to the increase of Humpback Whales off the BC coast. Lessons learned from that initiative, and results from a recent poll of ~4,000 recreational boaters, directly informed the course's development."*

That poll revealed that **53% of surveyed BC boaters were unable to correctly identify minimum approach distances** from marine mammals in various scenarios. The most cited barrier to compliance was: "Difficulty remembering the laws for different species, vessel types and/or areas."

The Whale-Safe Boating course directly addresses such knowledge gaps. It provides information about marine mammal behaviour that aids understanding of the laws and best practices for safe and responsible boating.

From Jackie Hilderling, MERS Director of Education and Communication:

*"The most effective way to increase safety, learning, and respect for marine wildlife, is to reach as many boaters as possible. There can be such significant gains when boaters share what they've learned, model best practices, and act as informed eyes on the water. We can all contribute to a culture of Whale-Safe Boating – for the wellbeing of people and our marine mammal neighbours."*

The *Whale-Safe Boating* course was made possible by **Transport Canada's Boater Safety Contribution Program** and was developed with input from an advisory committee of experts in boating, paddling, education, marine mammals, and regulatory policy.

To encourage early participation, the first 100 boaters to complete the course **will receive a free Whale Warning Flag**—a visual signal to others that whales are in the area and the need to heighten vigilance, slow down, and potentially alter course.

See the course at [www.WhaleSafeBoating.org](http://www.WhaleSafeBoating.org)

**Details:**

- The dynamic, online course is 90 minutes long
- Narrated with the option of close captioning
- Can be paused, resumed, and referred back to at any time
- Certificate of completion
- Downloadable resources
- Optional supplemental module includes details about marine mammal species in coastal BC, plus Basking Sharks and Leatherback Turtles
- Advisory Committee members included representation from:
  - Transport Canada
  - Fisheries and Oceans Canada
  - Parks Canada
  - Sea Kayak Alliance of British Columbia
  - Cetus Research and Conservation
  - Boating BC
  - CanBoat / NautiSavoir
  - Ocean Wise
  - Georgia Strait Alliance

**Media inquiries and access to the media pack:**

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*Humpback Whale Hope (BCZ0574) with injury from vessel strike, @Louis Jobidon.*



*Northern Resident Killer Whale Eliot (A109) with injury from vessel strike, @Marieke Knierim.*



**NE Vancouver Island:**  
**Zodiac hit Humpback.**  
**Vessel capsized and disabled.**

NE Vancouver Island: Driver thrown from boat, 15 stitches to chin, injured back.



**Haida Gwaii:** Man left paraplegic after boat collision with Humpback. 'A terrible nightmare'.



**Victoria:**  
**Two injured after whale-watching vessel strikes Humpback.**

Tofino: Whale suddenly surfaces. Avoided collision. Whale tail-lopped, broke window.



**Prince Rupert:**  
**Humpback surfaced under back of kayak.**  
**Flipped over, flooded and rudder ripped off.**

**Campbell River:** Facial surgery as result of collision.



**Central Coast:**  
**Humpback surfaced in front of boat. Hit at high speed.**  
**Boat airborne, passengers bruised.**

# See a Blow? Go Slow!

[www.WhaleSafeBoating.org](http://www.WhaleSafeBoating.org)



*Examples of injuries to boaters resulting from colliding with whales.*



*Humpback Whale Raza (BCX1852) with injury from vessel strike, ©Kaitlin Paquette.*





*Grey Whale Admiral (CRC144) with injury from vessel strike, ©Wendy Szaniszlo.*



*Whale-Safe Boating - Kayakers rafting up when Orca are in the area (Northern Residents)  
©Spirit of the West Adventures.*



*Whale-Safe Boating - Boater adhering to the legal avoidance distance. Humpback Whale is Ripple (BCX1063), ©MERS taken under Marine Mammal License MML-57.*

## WHALE-SAFE BOATING

### Why is this course needed?

[www.WhaleSafeBoating.org](http://www.WhaleSafeBoating.org)



#### Human Safety

Vessel operators have been severely injured by colliding with whales



#### Animal Safety

Marine mammals are injured and killed due to vessel strikes



#### Conservation

Acoustic and physical disturbance are threats to all marine mammals



#### Boater Comprehension

Over 50% of boaters do not know the correct legal avoidance distances from marine mammals



#### Culture of Doing the Right Thing

Demonstrated social influence of boaters adopting behaviours they see modelled by others

