



MARINE EDUCATION  
& RESEARCH SOCIETY

# Annual Report 2025



Ace (BCZ0440)

Photo: MERS, taken under MML-57

# A note from the Chair



Stitch (BCX1566) and Inukshuk (BCZ0339). Photo: MERS, taken under MML-57

Dear Friends and Supporters,

As I reflect on 2025, I am struck by the profound connection between people and the ocean—and how that relationship is evolving. This year reminded us that coexistence is not just an aspiration; it is a responsibility. Humpback Whales, whose return to B.C. waters is one of conservation's great success stories, now face new risks from vessel strikes, entanglement, climate change and underwater noise. These challenges are not abstract—they are happening in our backyard, and they call us to act with urgency and imagination.

At MERS, we believe that solutions begin with understanding and collaboration. This year we expanded our outreach through the successful launch of the Whale-Safe Boating course. Our research continues to reveal the complexity of whale behaviour and the pressures they face, while our education programs empower communities to make choices that protect marine life. But beyond data and outreach, what drives us is a vision: a coast where whales thrive alongside vibrant human communities, where technology and traditional knowledge work hand in hand, and where stewardship is woven into everyday life.

This vision is only possible because of you—our partners, donors, and advocates. Your commitment fuels hope and progress. Together, we are shaping a future where the ocean is not just a resource, but a shared home.

This year, we extend immense gratitude to past Chair, Leah Thorpe, one of our MERS co-founders who stepped down from the Board this June after 15 years of service and leadership. We couldn't let her go! Leah will continue to support MERS as Advisor to the Board in 2026.

Thank you for walking this path with us. Let's carry this momentum forward, guided by curiosity, compassion, and the belief that coexistence is within reach.

With gratitude,

Angela Danyluk  
Chair, Marine Education and Research Society





# MERS 101

## Our Purpose

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.

## Our Goals

- Healthy populations of marine species, protected from threats.
- Comprehensive knowledge of the ocean that informs decision-making.
- People are inspired and empowered to care for the ocean and co-exist with marine life.
- There is swift, effective response to incidents that threaten individual animals and their environment.

## Our Guiding Principles

- Research, Education, Response Together - All are equally important and inform the others.
- Science-forward - Our advocacy is informed by solid science, knowledge, and our significant experience.
- Solutions-based - Our efforts are guided by presenting solutions for change.
- Whales are Ambassadors for the Ocean - Knowledge of individual whales can inspire positive change.
- Marine Mammals Need a Healthy Ecosystem - We take a holistic approach to conservation.
- Resourceful and Nimble - We take action swiftly and address complex issues.
- Community Building - Conservation needs many champions; together we create change.



# Safe. Responsible. Legal.

July 2nd was one of the most exciting days of 2025 for the MERS team. It's the day we officially hit "Launch" on our Whale-Safe Boating course!

This free, self-paced, online course is the culmination of years of experience and work trying to bridge the gap between what boaters - both motorized and non-motorized - know and what they need to operate safely around marine mammals. We knew an all-in-one resource that bundled information from multiple agencies and sources was desperately needed to not only ensure the safety of the whales, but the safety of people too. We stepped in to fill this need.

This online course is a comprehensive, one-stop resource. It helps build a culture of recreational boaters "doing the right thing": staying safe, remaining compliant with regulations, and supporting marine mammal conservation.

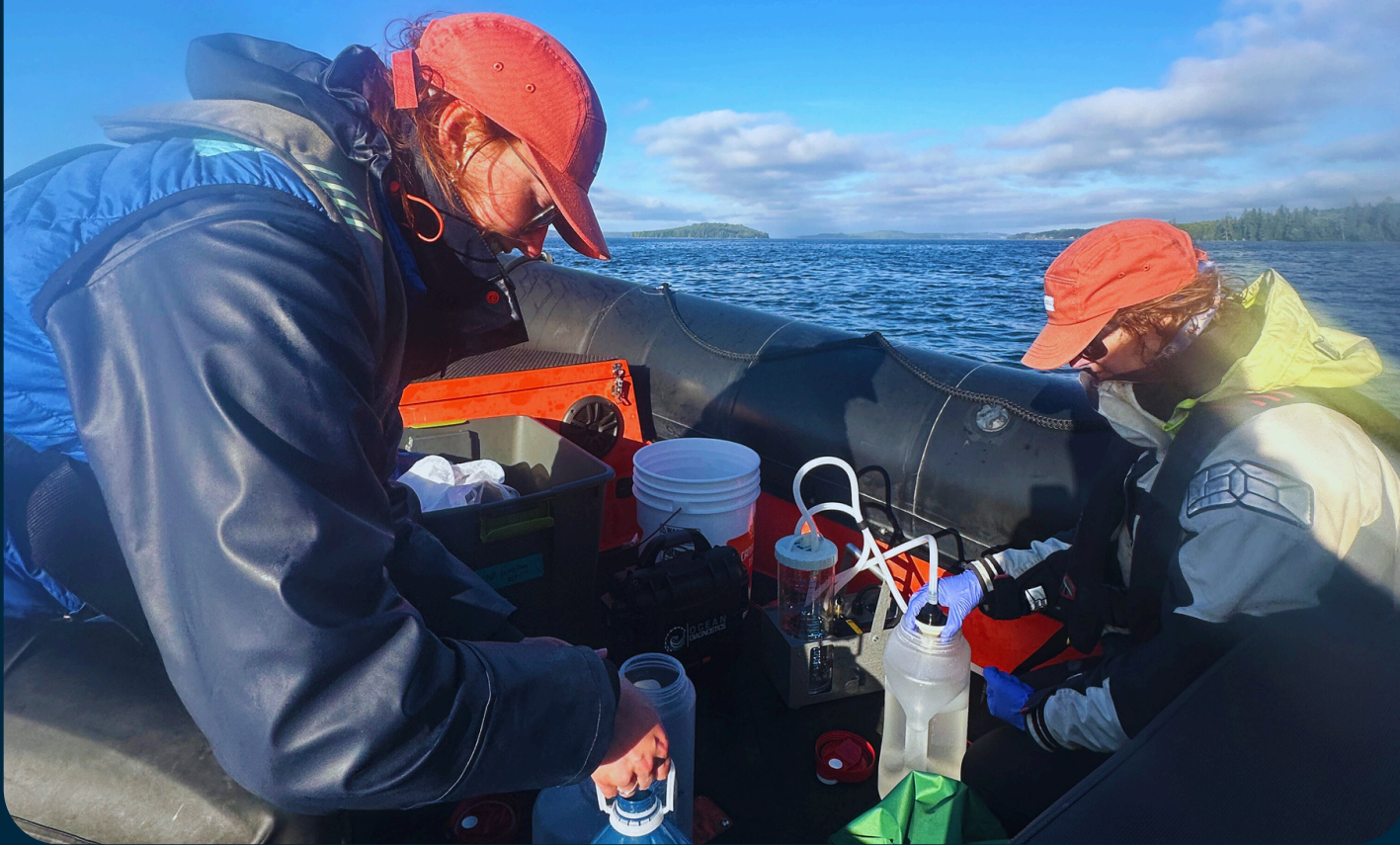
The Whale-Safe Boating course was made possible by Transport Canada's Boater Safety Contribution Program and developed with input from an advisory committee of experts in boating, paddling, education, marine mammals, and regulatory policy.

In its first 5 months, 1,570 people have signed up to take the course and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive: 98% of those who completed the feedback survey rated it as "Good", "Very Good" or "Excellent".

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







# What Can We Learn From a Bottle of Water?

## Learning about Humpback populations using eDNA

This year, we began a new research project with Amy Migneault, a PhD Candidate at the University of Victoria. This innovative research initiative is advancing the use of environmental DNA (eDNA) to support conservation and management of North Pacific Humpback Whales.

Historically, to address questions about whale population structure and demographics, genetic samples were obtained using biopsy samples, which can be invasive and challenging to collect consistently. Collecting eDNA, the genetic material shed by animals into their environment, offers a promising, non-invasive complementary tool. Although eDNA has transformed biodiversity monitoring across many ecosystems, its application to whales is still emerging.

Alongside Amy, the MERS team is collecting seawater samples directly from whale “flukeprints” (the flat spot of water at the surface evident after a whale dives) to capture sloughed skin cells left in a whale’s wake. These samples will then help answer the project’s two primary objectives:

- (1) to ground-truth eDNA by comparing genetic data from eDNA samples with biopsy samples collected from the same individual whales, and
- (2) to use whole-genome sequencing to assess population structure and dynamics of Humpbacks in British Columbia waters.

Amy hypothesizes that eDNA results will show compatibility with the level of genetic information compared to biopsy samples, and that the analysis of North Pacific Humpback Whale population structure will suggest delineation of genetically distinct sub-populations.

Stay tuned as this project progresses!



# Shifting the Culture of Marine Wildlife Media

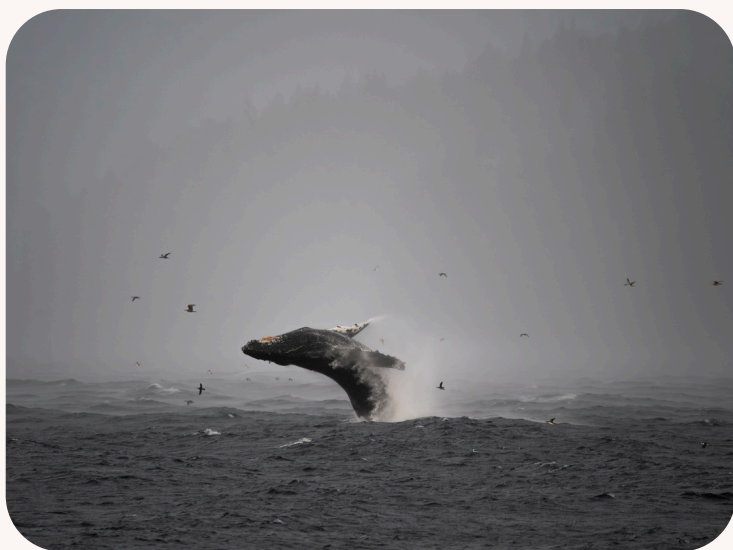
## Quick Numbers:

- 100+ media professionals engaged through our Media Matters Workshop
- 50+ media items featuring MERS messaging in 2025
- 90 photos and videos submitted to the ‘How Wild’ contest
- 8 Winners and Honourable Mentions chosen for the ‘How Wild’ contest

Too often, media, advertising, and photography portray close encounters with marine mammals as the ideal experience. This narrative can cause real harm—encouraging people to get too close, obscuring legal requirements and best practices, and increasing the risk of disturbance and habituation.

This year, we worked proactively to shift that story. Through initiatives such as our How Wild photography contest in collaboration with the Canadian Conservation Photographers Collective and our Media Matters outreach (webinar, resource, and direct communications) for journalists, we promoted that: the best wildlife encounter is one that creates as little disturbance as possible—one that unfolds as if you weren’t there.

By working directly with those that make the media so many are consuming, we’re shifting how we see ethical marine mammal encounters portrayed.



Winners of the photography categories in the “How Wild” Contest.

Left: Winner - Photo From Land: Claire Guillaume/Orcalab. Right: Winner - Photo From Vessel: Kristiana Bardsnes.



# Know Your Neighbours

## Exploring site fidelity in Humpback Whales

Who are the Humpback Whales that are consistently seen in coastal B.C. and how do they use the coast? Are there patterns to which individuals return to specific areas year after year?

These are questions that are being answered by MERS' newest research project: Know Your Neighbours: fine-scale site fidelity of Humpback Whales within their B.C. feeding grounds. This project makes use of the Canadian Pacific Humpback Collaboration database which incorporates data from seven partner organizations, DFO, as well as hundreds of citizen scientists. If you've contributed data to MERS in the past, you've helped make this research possible!

Preliminary findings suggest that even though Humpback Whales are capable of movement of thousands of kilometres yearly, when they come back to B.C. to feed, they stay in the same relatively small area. The Humpback Whales seen near Port McNeill are different individuals than the Humpback seen consistently near Campbell River, Prince Rupert, Tofino, etc.

While this finding might not be surprising to those of you who have been contributing dorsal and fluke identification photos, it has important repercussions on our understanding of Humpback Whales at a global scale, as well as how we manage their conservation in Canada.

Insomnia (BCY1136). Photo: MERS, taken under MML-57





# Fly Your Flag (For Free)

The Whale Warning Flag is a tool used by boaters to let others know that whales are in the area. It is a reminder to all on the water to slow down, be on alert, and be prepared to adjust course.

The flag was first created on northern Vancouver Island, but is now used throughout the Pacific Northwest to present a unified message promoting vigilance and good vessel operation around all marine mammals.

The ecotourism sector was one of the first adopters of the Whale Warning Flag, so in 2023 we conducted a survey of professionals in this field to learn more about how they use the flag, how they feel it works, and ways to improve the tool. One of the key messages we heard from that survey is that an impediment to using the flag was actually just having access to a flag.

So in 2025, we worked to distribute these flags FOR FREE, to remove barriers and improve access. We've given away nearly 200 free Whale Warning Flags to boaters and ecotourism professionals this year alone, with plans for more free, targeted distribution in 2026.





# Going Further

## Our new vessel “Megaptera” continues to expand our range

In last year’s annual report, we told you about our new vessel, Megaptera. Many of our supporters contributed to purchasing and updating the vessel for our needs, and boy has it been a game changer!

Thanks to its capacity, we are safer, and have significantly expanded the range of when and where we can work. This year, the team was able to conduct surveys off the northern and northwestern areas of Vancouver Island; we even made it 20 nm offshore to the continental shelf while working in the territory of the Quatsino First Nation.

Surveying in new areas is a way for us to more fully understand how Humpback Whales are using the waters off B.C., and will also allow us to expand our research focus. In particular, we’re interested in documenting the occurrence and distribution of Grey Whales around northern Vancouver Island and the Central Coast. Adding to the knowledge of Grey Whale habitat use will support potential new management and conservation measures for this species if they are re-listed as different sub-populations (some of which are endangered) under the Species at Risk Act, as recommended by the Committee of the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

### Highlights:

- Documenting 17 Humpback Whales that had never before been recorded in B.C. waters
- Finding 5 individual Mola off northwestern Vancouver Island
- Spending time on the water with the Quatsino First Nation Guardians while surveying their territory together
- Collecting eDNA water samples from whales not previously sampled



Photo: Elizabeth Zwamborn

# More MERS by the Numbers

2025 Edition



Humpback Encounters  
Contributed by Citizen Scientists

>1,100



People Engaged Through  
MERS Outreach and  
Presentations

>3,150



New Humpback Calves  
in MERS Study Area

10



15th Anniversary Shirts  
and Bags Sold

>185



Photos and Videos  
Analyzed for Our  
Humpback Scar Study

18,803



Nautical Miles Covered by  
Our Vessel, Megaptera

2,041



Visitors to the  
MERS Office and  
Education Space

>2,200



MERS Workshops  
Conducted for First Nations,  
Government, and Educators

4



Pieces of Duchess'  
Bannock Consumed During  
Team Day in Alert Bay

SO MANY



# MERS Yearbook 2025

Moments from the year



L to R: Felicia presents at the Cortes Island Museum; Nicole on survey aboard Megaptera during a chilly winter survey; Marieke and Callyn attend the Vancouver Boat Show to connect with a key audience; A Mola mola spotted on an offshore survey; Team Day in 'Yalis/Alert Bay learning at the U'mista Cultural Centre



L to R: Superstar volunteer Patti connects with youth at Ocean Day in Campbell River; Jackie and Felicia film with Sarika Cullis-Suzuki for a documentary on the importance of Humpbacks; Interactive games at our Marine Mammal Naturalist Course; New Research Associate Alia Rauf joins us on a survey; MERS wins a "Best Presentation" award for a session at the Humpback Whale World Congress in Tadoussac, Quebec



L to R: Assisting with the rescue and transfer of a Harbour Seal pup in need; Callyn and Cheri, with Graem, Guardian from the Quatsino First Nation; Responding to the stranding death of a rare Bryde's Whale near Port McNeill; Jackie and Caitlin accept the Nightingale Award for Ocean Engagement on behalf of MERS at the Raincoast Ocean Science Awards (Photo: Raincoast); Scene from our first ever "MERS Trivia Night" held at the Devils' Bath Brewing Company

# MERS Team in 2025



Photo: Bryan Hillyer

## Board of Directors

Leah Thorpe (Chair - outgoing)  
Angela Danyluk (Chair - incoming)  
Rhona Govender (Vice-Chair)  
Don Gordon (Treasurer)  
Wendy Kotorynski (Secretary)  
Anita Blakely (Member at Large)  
Emily Wisden-Seaweed (Member at Large)  
Joey Levesque (Member at Large)

## Team Members

Caitlin Birdsall (Executive Director)  
Nicole Doe (Director of Operations)  
Jackie Hildering (Director of Education and Communications)  
Christie McMillan (Science Lead)  
Dr. Felicia Vachon (Research Coordinator)  
Marieke Knierim (Office and Outreach Coordinator)  
Callyn Holder (Research and Education Assistant)

## Seasonal Staff

Jaime Rae  
Simon Grieshaber-Otto  
Brooklyn McComb

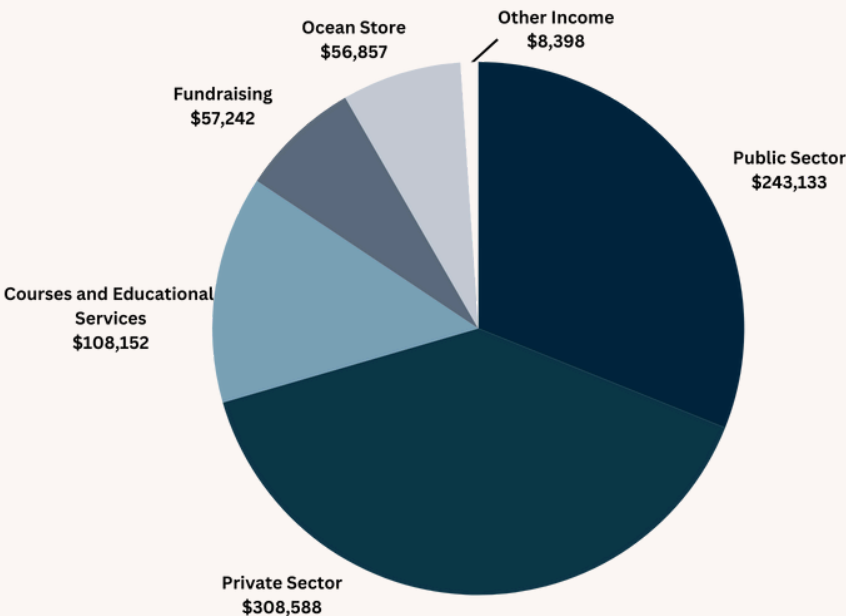
## Research Associates

Tasli Shaw  
Mark Sawyer & Ashley Hoyland  
Karina Dracott  
Amy Migneault  
Alia Rauf

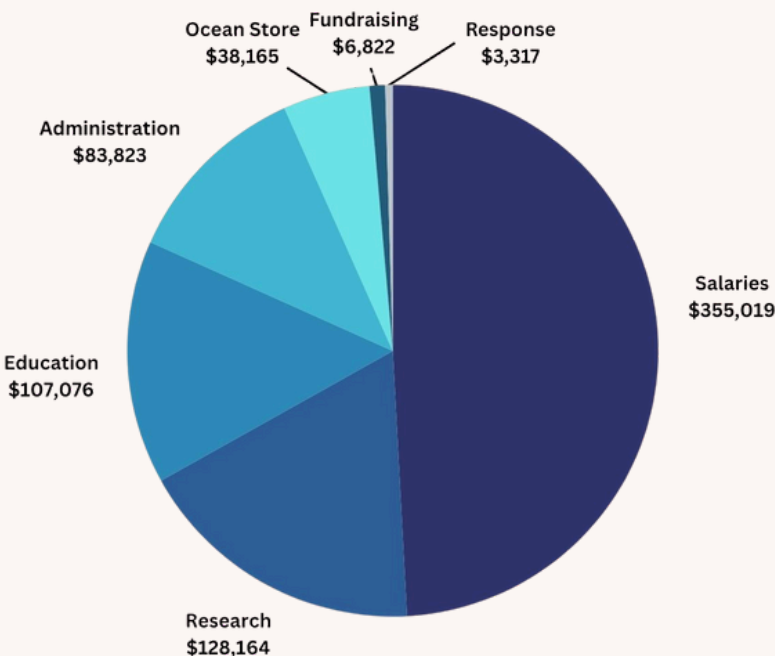


# 2025 Financial Snapshot

## Revenue



## Expenses



# Acknowledgement and Gratitude

Our supporters, partners and collaborators make this work possible.

An Ocean of Gratitude to all our Donors, Volunteers, Humpback Sponsors, Auction Sponsors, and those who support MERS through attending events and shopping at our Ocean Store.

## 2025 Grants

Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk

Canada Nature Fund for Aquatic Species at Risk

Boater Safety Contribution Program - Transport Canada

North Island Marine Mammal Stewardship Association Conservation Fund

Clayoquot Biosphere Trust (for Humpbacks of Clayoquot and Barkley Sound project)

## Corporate and Foundation Support >\$1000

Sandpiper Foundation

Alway-Connors Charitable Fund

MakeWay Foundation - Hummingbird Fund

Orca Spirit Adventures

Campbell River Whale Watching

Mackay Whale Watching

Wortley Foundation Fund through the Victoria Foundation

Freya Fund through the Victoria Foundation

Humpback Inn

Clayoquot Biosphere Trust (for the Whales of Clayoquot and Barkley Sound Project)

Organic & Sustainable Trading Canada

Mothership Adventures

Boeing (Employee Matching)

Eagle Wing Tours

Grey Wolf Expeditions

And the many individual donors whose generosity fuels our work.

# Thank you.



# Contact

## Marine Education and Research Society

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Quartz (BCX1472). Photo: MERS, taken under MML-57



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