

Large Whale Entanglement Response: 2025 Season-end Report



Entangled subadult humpback whale off of Maui Nui.
Photo: Harvey/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit #24359

Authorization

NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program (MMHSRP permit # 24359).

Objectives

- Provide safe and authorized response to entangled large whales to free them from life-threatening entanglements
- Reduce risk of response from well-intentioned public
- Increase awareness and promote stewardship
- Gather information to mitigate the risks associated with entanglement

Network

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary (sanctuary) coordinates large whale entanglement response across the main Hawaiian Islands, working closely with NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, Pacific Islands Regional Office, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, and Office of Law Enforcement; Hawai'i State Department of Land and Natural Resources; United States Coast Guard; the tour industry; researchers; fishers; and others on receiving and responding to reports of large whales in life-threatening entanglements.

Synopsis

The 2024-2025 humpback whale season (December 1, 2024 – May 1, 2025) was the network's 23rd season, and the busiest to-date. There were 32 confirmed reports representing 16 entangled whales. There were 17 on-water response efforts mounted to 7 animals over an extremely busy 3 month period. This unprecedented level of activity highlights both the need for intervention and the dedication of the response network in Hawai'i.



Ed Lyman and Maria Harvey make a cut to the entangling gear on a humpback whale. Photo: Zadra/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit # 24359.

Reports

- 51 large whale entanglement reports received
- 32 reports confirmed
- 16 animals sighted multiple times (15 humpbacks, 1 sperm whale)
- 10 reports from Maui
- 3 reports from O'ahu
- 2 reports from Hawai'i Island
- 1 report from Lāna'i
- 10 of the entangled animals were adults, 3 were subadults, 2 were calves, 1 was of an unknown age-class
- 13 of the 16 cases were potentially life-threatening entanglements
 - 4 involved multiple body parts (e.g., fluke, mouth, head, pectoral fin)
 - 2 were mouth only
 - 1 was head
 - 3 were forward wraps on the body
 - 1 was fluke blade
 - 5 originated from an unknown location
- 8 of 16 cases utilized drones
- 2 cases were reported by helicopters

Response

Of the 7 animals engaged, all represented complex entanglements making disentanglement extremely challenging.

- 4 animals were known to be freed of gear
- 3 were possibly freed (i.e., cuts were made, and the gear could be shed at a later time)
- 1 animal self-released
- 1 animal was freed by a fisher



Drone flies over the Ultimate Whale Watch Boat, Aloha Kai, documenting the disentanglement effort. Photo: McLeish/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit # 24359.

Gear Investigation

Gear was removed and collected in four separate cases, totaling 529 ft. Documentation assisted in determining the origin two gear sets originating from the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. One gear set was commercial crab gear from British Columbia, and the other was consistent with high-latitude pot gear. Unfortunately, the remaining cases provided little indication of the identity or origin of the gear, mostly due to the lack of clear documentation and/or identifying features.

Other Reports

Overall, more than 80 reports were received and logged by the sanctuary in their Animal in Distress (AID) database. Six of the reports represented confirmed and non-incident contact between whales and vessels. The sanctuary also mounted a response to a deceased humpback calf off Kīhei and a separated calf off West Maui.



The response team works to disentangle a mother humpback whale. Photo: Schonwald/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit #24359

Acknowledgement of Support

Response efforts involved Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA Fisheries' Protected Resources, Pacific Islands Regional Office, Office of Law Enforcement, and Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center; Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument; U.S. Coast Guard Stations O'ahu and Maui; Ultimate Whale Watch; Hawai'i Division of Aquatic Resources; Pacific Whale Foundation; Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission; Captain Zodiac; Whaleman Foundation; Kaimana Ocean Safari; Cardinal Point Captains; NOAA Corps; tour operations; researchers; fishers; and many others.



Underwater documentation aids responders in understanding the gear configuration and where cuts need to be made to free the whale. Photo: Lyman/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit #24359



Highlights

- More than 70 hours of training conducted
- More than 30 hours of outreach performed
- 51 reports of entangled large whales received and 32 confirmed, representing 16 different whales entangled in gear
- The first confirmed report of the season was December 8; the last was February 19
- Reports were from Hawai'i Island, O'ahu, Lāna'i, and Maui Nui
- 10 cases were adults, 3 were subadults and 2 were calves
- 17 multi-asset, authorized responses were mounted to 7 animals over 3 months
- 4 animals were known to be freed of all gear
- Since 2002, the Hawai'i Network has freed 44 large whales from life-threatening entanglements, removing more than 15,690 feet of line and netting



R/V Kohola making an approach to an entangled whale. Photo: Lyman/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit # 24359

What to do if you find an entangled whale

If you sight an entangled whale, maintain at least 100 yards' distance, obtain imagery, and immediately call the **NOAA Fisheries' Marine Wildlife Hotline at (888) 256-9840**. If unable to call, please radio the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF CH. 16, and they will relay the report. Do not approach closely or attempt to free the animal. While well-intentioned, freeing a 40-ton whale is extremely dangerous for the animal and the would-be rescuer. Getting in the water is especially dangerous; people have been killed. Only trained and well-equipped responders that are authorized under NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program are permitted to disentangle whales. The best way to help an entangled whale and keep people safe, is to provide trained, well-equipped, and authorized responders with the opportunity to respond. If able and safe, you may be asked to monitor the animal from a legal distance (100 yards or more) until the response team arrives. The Hawai'i response network has freed 40 large whales from life-threatening entanglements over the past 23 years.



Photo: Schonwald/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit #24359



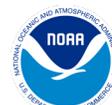
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Photo: Lyman/NOAA under MMHSRP Permit #24359

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary is jointly managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the state of Hawai'i.

<https://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov/>



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