

Southern Resident Killer Whales & Vessels



Learn more about the regulations and WDFW's SRKW Conservation and Management actions by [visiting our website](#):



wdfw.wa.gov/orca

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Photo by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Permit #16163)

Listed as federally endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 2005, the Southern Resident killer whale (SRKW) population sits at just 73 individuals as of a July 2024 census. This population is divided into three distinct pods, or family groups; J, K, and L pods. Their habitat ranges from central California to southeast Alaska, but the core portion of their range centers on the coastal waters of southern Vancouver Island and Washington state and the inland waters of the Salish Sea.

Killer whales are an icon of the Pacific Northwest and indicative of a healthy ecosystem. They carry cultural significance for many of the northwest coast's Native American peoples, and are a valuable member of the Salish Sea's biological community. Their success reflects our collective priorities and informs our sense of place.

The SRKW face three main threats: **lack of food, contaminants in their food and habitat, and vessel noise and disturbance**. Due in part to these threats the SRKW population has continued to decline since their listing, requiring additional intervention to save them from extinction. Prey availability and noise are connected. When it's noisy, the whales must work harder to hunt, and often give up or fail to catch the salmon that are available. Research suggests that increasing the availability of salmon alone will not be enough to recover the population, but reducing vessel noise and disturbance while increasing prey is a more impactful way to help recover SRKW. Our goal is to recover the population according to [NOAA Fisheries Recovery Plan](#), such that the species no longer requires protection.

To address vessel disturbance, regulations are in place in Washington state.

Per RCW 77.15.740, motorized and non-motorized vessel operators (including kayakers and paddleboarders) must:

- **Stay 1,000 yards away from Southern Resident killer whales.**
- **Attempt to navigate out of the path and away from Southern Resident killer whales within 1,000 yards of their vessel while adhering to a 7-knot speed limit.**
- **(If a Southern Resident killer whale approaches within 400 yards) Disengage the transmission, if it is safe to do so, and wait for the animal to move away.** WDFW also asks that sailors luff sails and paddle-craft stop paddling, group up, and wait for the animal to move away.

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What do I do if an SRKW approaches or surfaces near me?

If a Southern Resident killer whale approaches you or surfaces within 1,000 yards of your vessel, you can slowly move away from the whale at a speed of 7 knots or less. If the whale is within 400 yards of your vessel, immediately disengage the transmission until the whales have moved out of the area, if it's safe to do so. Sailors, luff sails and wait for the whales to move on, and kayakers, group together out of the path of the whales and cease paddling.

How far do I need to stay away from other whales (including transient killer whales)?

Stay at least 200 yards from all other killer whales in Washington waters, and at least 100 yards away from any other whales. Visit the [NOAA website](#) to learn more.

How do I know if I'm 1,000 yards away?

1,000 yards is roughly half of a nautical mile, or ten football fields (goal line to goal line). A male orca fin is roughly the size of an adult man, so if the fin looks bigger than a man 10 football fields away from you, you should move away. If you have a range finder, you can use it to hone your distance-gauging skills. If available, you also can use landmarks and mapping software to triangulate relative distance. There are also friendly Enforcement officers and Soundwatch volunteers on the water who can let you know if you need to back up. If you see whales and aren't sure how far away you are, err on the side of caution and move away and out of their path at a speed of 7 knots or less.

How am I supposed to see orcas that far away on the water?

The average person can see 2+ miles on a clear day in flat water. Of course, weather and water conditions may reduce that distance. Boaters should always be aware of their surroundings and on the lookout for signs of whales (fins, blows, vessels flying a whale warning flag, whale watch vessels, other vessels on the water). If you see an orca on the horizon, consider erring on the side of caution by staying away.

Is Enforcement going to ticket me when... I didn't know whales were nearby or couldn't see them; they surprised me; I was in a narrow channel; I couldn't safely move; etc.?

These regulations were passed by the Washington Legislature in 2023 to help these endangered whales have a chance at survival. WDFW first and foremost wants boaters to be safe, and Enforcement won't ticket you for trying your best to follow the regulations while navigating safety issues. WDFW Enforcement wants to support boaters trying to do the right thing, and initial and ongoing efforts will be focused on education and outreach, not issuing citations. Repeat offenders or especially egregious circumstances may still be cited. Citations written by WDFW Officers do not generate revenue for the Department.

How can I tell the difference between resident and transient killer whales?

There are resources online to help boaters learn the differences, but the differences between Southern Resident and Transient killer whales are subtle and may be difficult to determine in various conditions. Because of this, WDFW recommends that untrained boaters assume that all killer whales in the Salish Sea are Southern Residents, unless/until you're sure otherwise. Information from apps/sightings networks may let you know if SRKW have been seen recently in the area you plan to be in. Context clues on the water, such as the presence of whale watching vessels at closer distances, may also indicate that whales aren't SRKW. However, boaters are expected to use their own judgment and err on the side of caution.

What should I do if I see someone else getting too close to a Southern Resident killer whale?

If possible, take photos or videos of the vessel in question, including its operator, or note any distinct colors, markings, numbers, or lettering on the vessel itself. Then, when it is safe to do so, you can call WDFW Enforcement at 1-877-933-9847. Another option is to visit [bewhalewise.org/report-violators](https://www.bewhalewise.org/report-violators) to submit a report online.

What vessels are exempt from these regulations?

Some exemptions to these laws do exist. Large craft such as shipping vessels and their escorting ships are exempt (see the [Quiet Sound](#) program to learn more), as are local, state, federal, or Tribal government vessels conducting some official duties, and NOAA-authorized research vessels. Tribal or commercial fishing vessels are exempt when actively setting, retrieving, or closely tending fishing gear, but not while in transit. Read [RCW 77.15.740](#) for more information about exemptions. Commercial whale watching vessels are not exempt.

What about commercial whale watching vessels?

Commercial whale watching vessels have largely adhered to a 1,000-yard setback from SRKW since detailed industry regulations went into effect in 2021. If you see one or more commercial whale watching vessels near orcas, they may be viewing Bigg's transient orcas, which can be viewed from 200+ yards by those who can distinguish the orca ecotypes.