



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

February 14, 2020

Visitor Industry Task Force (VITF)
City and Borough of Juneau
155 S Seward Street
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear VITF,

Thank you for the opportunity to present on NOAA Fisheries Whale SENSE program to Mayor Weldon's Visitor Industry Task Force on December 17, 2019. Whale SENSE is a voluntary education, stewardship, and recognition program implemented jointly through NOAA Fisheries and Whale and Dolphin Conservation (www.whalesense.org). The program first started in 2009 in the Atlantic. In 2015, it was extended to Juneau and carefully adapted to fit local needs, hand-in-hand with several Juneau-area whale-watching companies and other stakeholders. Since that time, the program has grown to include most, but not all, of Juneau's marine tour operators and been expanded to four other Alaskan ports. Some of the highlights of the program include:

- Reduced speeds while approaching/departing whales
- Time limits for viewing whales to reduce cumulative impacts from vessels
- An annual stewardship project by each company (eg., beach clean-ups in the tour area)
- Annual training for captains, naturalists, guides (eg., in 2019, training and educational resources were provided to > 100 crew members based in Juneau alone)
- Strengthened relationships among operators and with our agency (greater levels of collaboration and positive communication in meetings, on the water, and on the docks since the program's inception)



Juneau's whale watching industry is unlike any other in the world. The whale-watching itself is spectacular, and remains one of the best places on the planet to see bubble-net feeding humpback whales or killer whales on a tour. However, the size of the industry is unparalleled; we have far more boats than whales. When whales are abundant, there can be the equivalent of four whale-watching boats for each whale in the area. When whales are less abundant, there can be nearly 30 whale-watching boats for each whale in the area. Nowhere else on earth is whale-watching this concentrated.

This reality raises concerns from several angles 1) the welfare of whales in the tour area, 2) the community's experience and perception towards the industry, 3) the passenger experience and quality of whale-watching tours in Juneau, and 4) the sustainability of this important industry. These unique challenges will require an industry which collaborates to work through issues and accommodate the inevitable future growth. **Therefore, we urge the Task Force to recommend that all marine operators in Juneau engaged in whale-watching join and remain in good standing in the Whale SENSE program.** Similarly to the Docks and Harbors endorsement of TBMP via loading permits, we ask that the City find an appropriate way to endorse and support the Whale SENSE program. This would help ensure that all operators have a common platform, from which to effectively set high standards for reducing impacts and ensuring sustainability of this important industry.

Thank you,



Suzie Teerlink, PhD

Whale SENSE Alaska Coordinator

NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region, Protected Resources Division

