Hawaiian Islands humpback Whale
National Marine Sanctuary

2008 Accomplishments

Photo: NOAA

Photo: Lars Fackler

Photo: Claire Fackler

Humpback Whale Population Rebounding

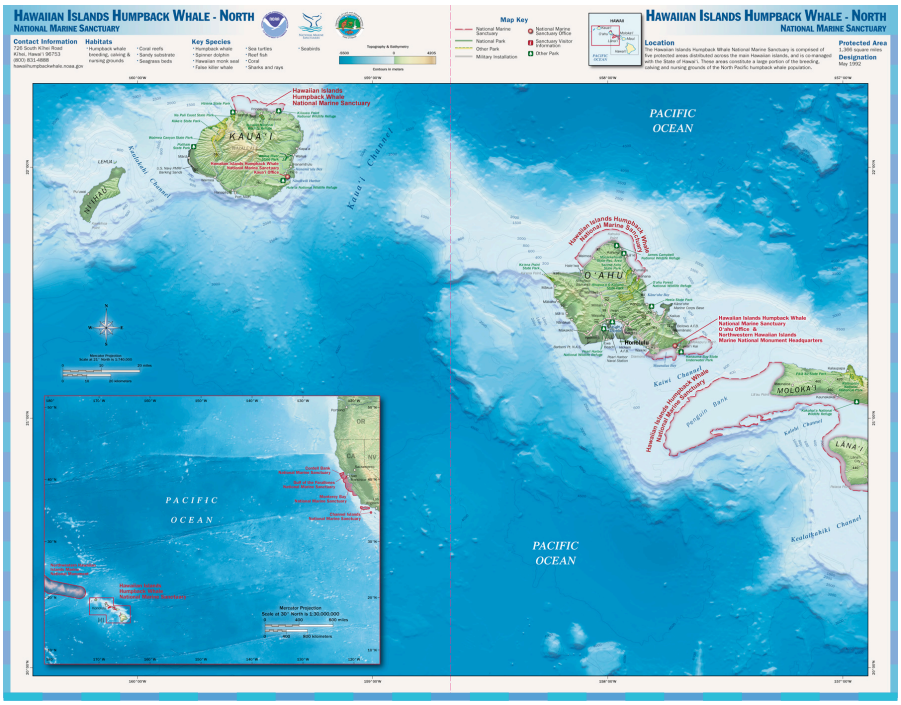
After four years of an intensive international study called Structure of Population, Levels of Abundance and Status of Humpback Whales in the North Pacific (SPLASH), the long-awaited research project's report on population is in; the number of humpback whales in the North Pacific has increased dramatically. According to the report published in May 2008, there were fewer than 1,500 humpback whales in the region when the last population studies were done in the 1960s. Today, the population has rebounded to approximately 18,000 to 20,000 animals. Researchers attribute this increase to the international banning of whaling in the region in 1966; the institution of federal protection laws in the 1970s, including the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act; and the increased public awareness of the problem, which has been driven by many groups, including the sanctuary. The SPLASH study, initiated by NOAA and key partners in 2004, was the most ambitious, large-scale study ever conducted on any whale population in the world. The project brought together more than 400 researchers from 50 organizations throughout the Pacific Rim, including the United States, Japan, Russia, Mexico, Canada, Philippines, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.

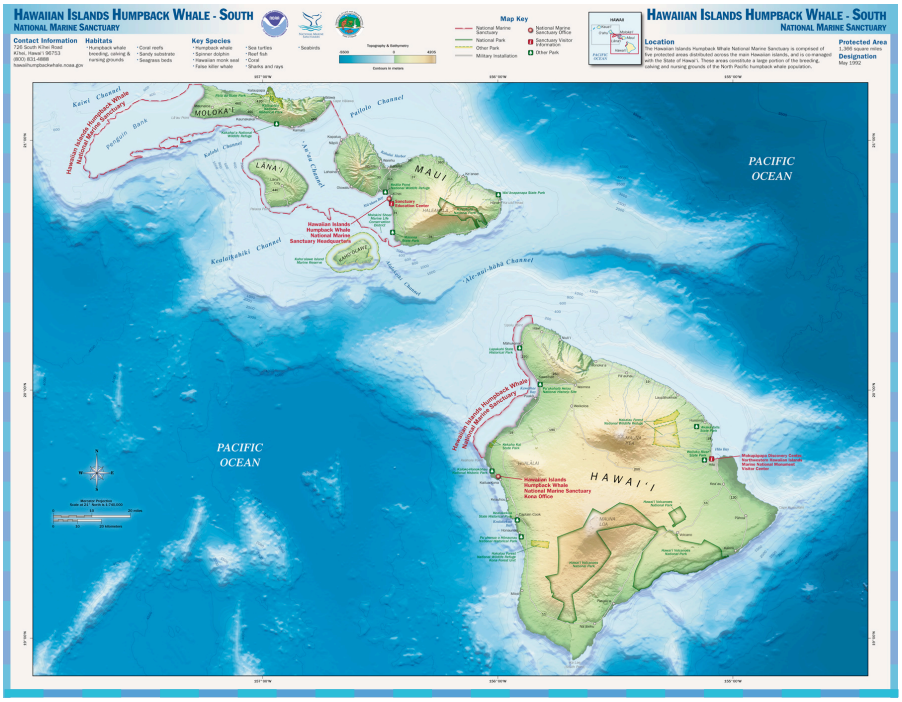
Sanctuary Initiates Ocean Etiquette Campaign

In an effort to protect humpback whales, the sanctuary launched an Ocean Etiquette Campaign in 2008, focusing on ocean users, commercial marine tour operators, and naturalists. Boater workshops were held on all islands to review tips, guidelines, and laws meant to keep ocean users and whales safe. The campaign also includes the distribution of related publications, a series of public service announcements, and advertisements. Press releases generated two television news stories and seven newspaper articles reaching thousands of readers in all four Hawaii counties. In addition to the boater workshops, other trainings were held to make ocean users more knowledgeable about the marine environment. Conservation organizations on Maui and Oahu joined forces to offer a free Ocean Awareness Training certification course to the community and commercial marine tour operators. Participants completed six class sessions and one field day to receive a C.O.R.A.L. (care of our Culture, Ocean, Reefs and Animal Life) certification card. Nominated for the 2007 & 2008 Living Reef Award, this training course provides a knowledge base for those employed in the marine recreation industry and for community volunteers who want to learn more about Hawai'i's marine environment.

Sanctuary Education Programs Connect Students and the Ocean

Over 7,000 students got their feet wet to learn about our ocean resources in 2008. The sanctuary is promoting field trips that get the students out into the field. A special fund has been established to help support buses for classes participating in field activities. On Kaua'i students participated in "Science on the Beach," where workshops featuring hands-on activities promoting ocean stewardship are led by community experts. On Maui, middle and high school stu-





Sanctuary maps available at sanctuaries.noaa.gov

dents are conducting long term opihi (limpets) studies to assess size and abundance, quantifying invasive limu (algae) growth, participating in fish counts, and participating in water quality monitoring projects.

Community Members Participate in Water Quality Monitoring Project

Through the help of many community partners, volunteers, and high school students are conducting weekly tests to help assess the health of the local waters. Samples from three local sites are taken weekly to test for Enteroccocus bacteria, salinity, temperature, turbidity and pH. Data results are tracked by sanctuary staff with monthly averages, and readings for bacteria that are above the state and EPA's acceptable levels are sent to the state health department and the EPA. This program directly connects students and volunteers to watershed issues and gives them an avenue to become involved in an important community issue.

First International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary and its partners have coordinated the first-ever International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas. Developed by an international steering committee and hosted on the island of Maui form March 30 – April 3, 2009, the conference will bring together marine protected area managers from around the world. Through sharing experiences and lessons learned, managers will increase their effectiveness in managing dynamic populations of highly mobile marine mammals that inhabit their sites. Participants will include, among others, practitioners from developing countries in Latin America, Oceania, and Africa.

Disentanglement and Emergency Response Program

Globally, the leading known human cause of humpback whale mortality is entanglement in marine debris such as ropes and nets. Recognized as experts in the field, sanctuary staff continue to lead efforts to mitigate the effects on entanglement locally, nationally, and internationally. Since 2002, the sanctuary, through the Hawaiian Islands Disentanglement Network, has conducted numerous responses and successfully freed several humpback whales of life-threatening entanglements. Sanctuary staff continues to advise on equipment design, new technologies and protocols, as well as specific events throughout the US and the world. They provide expertise in management and the development of policy through their participation in the International Whaling Commission.

To learn more about these and other accomplishments, visit sanctuaries.noaa.gov