

Best Practices to Avoid Ship Whale Strikes

When we think about the ocean, we might think of ships crossing it, or we might think about the amazing creatures that live at sea. Whales are without a doubt one of the most emblematic animals that seafarers constantly encounter in their travels. Whales migration patterns, as well as their feeding, nursing, resting, and mating grounds, do intersect with shipping activities. According to the IMO and NOAA, all sizes and types of ship or vessel, including recreational, commercial, and governmental vessels, have the potential to collide with nearly all marine species. It is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders within the shipping industry to actively contribute to the mitigation efforts and protection of whales.

Vessel damage notwithstanding, the whale will likely come off the worse in the exchange. Damage to small vessels ranging from minor to extreme has resulted from ship strikes of cetaceans. So let's talk about ships striking whales and what we can and should do about it. According to IMO guidance, ship strikes of cetaceans are an issue of growing concern internationally. With the increase in the number, size, and speed of ships, the threat of ship strikes of cetaceans may also increase.

Navigators face substantial challenges in detecting and observing whales in the vicinity of the ship. The task becomes particularly daunting in rough seas or low light conditions, making it at times nearly impossible to spot these marine creatures or detect them with the ship's radar. Often, the first challenge is simply learning where marine mammals are. Maps of habitat are slowly improving and charts are beginning to incorporate this information. Enhancing awareness by highlighting marine mammals highest population area and migration routes in the voyage planning is important if we are aiming to reduce ship strikes.

The World Shipping Council provides some of this information. Take a look, for example, at this chart of the northwestern Mediterranean Sea, which is a particularly sensitive area. In this region, the following voluntary actions are recommended. Navigating with particular caution in areas where large and medium cetaceans are detected or reported. Some companies have demonstrated good procedures for whale protection.

Best Practices to Avoid Ship Whale Strikes

We believe it would be beneficial to share this advice. If a whale is spotted, reduce speed to a safe level 10 to 13 knots or less, and make a wide turn to ensure a safe distance. The most severe and lethal injuries caused by ship strikes appear to be caused by vessels traveling 14 knots or faster. Always refrain from assuming that a whale will move away from our vessel. Exercise caution.

In most cases, vessel operators do not see whales before they are hit or they see them only a few minutes before the collision. Minimize or avoid traveling through whale habitats and critical areas, especially during the nighttime. Never position your ship directly in the path of a whale and avoid approaching whales head on. When navigating near whales, steer behind their path to prevent crossing ahead of them. Actively seek and identify whales along the track line ahead of the ship.

Avoid areas with reported concentrations of whales. Never position a vessel between 2 or more whales. If whales approach your vessel, do not attempt to maneuver around them. Instead, slow down or stop if possible until the animal moves away. Keep a safe distance.

Report sightings if applicable, and it is recommended that lookouts report all whale and whale blow sightings to the bridge officer of the watch. It is recommended to report collisions in the event of a whale strike and form the company. It is recommended to submit a detailed written report to the company within 24 hours of any such instant and to report the event to the local authorities where applicable. It is recommended to make an entry in the log book. This chart of Sri Lankan waters is a good example.

In it, the red and green lines indicate traffic, while the blue dots indicate sightings of blue whales. So now we understand that our ship's passage might sometimes overlap with regions populated by sedations. In light of that, what can we do to mitigate the risk? 1st, wherever possible, reroute shipping lanes to eliminate or decrease the level of overlap with important whale habitat. If avoiding whale habitat is not possible, introduce and enforce speed limits in critical whale habitat.

Best Practices to Avoid Ship Whale Strikes

This is a big 1. Complacency. Assuming everything is under control. When things are repetitive and slow, you might no longer pay attention to routine or familiar tasks. For example, crew on a ferry calling at the same port several times a day may no longer check the voyage.

It's crucial not to make false assumptions and avoid confirmation bias. According to Ensley and Kiris, individuals who lost situational awareness performed worse when faced with automated system warnings and they lost time adapting to the situation. A decrease in situational awareness during critical ship operations may also cause decisions to be delayed, resulting in events such as entering the port area at high speed, being unable to make tReduced vessel speeds have been shown to reduce the risk of collisions and associated mortality by up to 90%. Training courses to cruise raise awareness about whales and why we must respect and protect them. Be aware that whales are not always on the move. Sometimes they might be sleeping or recovering, and they will be vulnerable as a result. Some ports are concerning whales and cetaceans in their passage plans and piloted information exchanges.

So there you have it. This is really not a difficult one to get. Whales are incredibly important to the health of our oceans and as a result of our planet. It is our responsibility to ensure that we are as careful and conscious as we possibly can when crossing their habitats in order to avoid striking them and causing them any harm. Make yourself aware of how they use the waters you'll be sailing on.

Report any sightings and always consider whales' lives in your planning.