



Program sets whale-watch standards

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Federal officials and whale conservationists are trying to encourage Northeast whale-watch boat companies to mind their manners on the water: that is, treat whales respectfully, give passengers good information about the marine mammals, and help out with conservation and protection.

Some operators say they're already doing that. But with the new program called Whale SENSE, the whale-watch companies may get more customers.

Market research has shown that when given a choice, customers will tend to choose a product that's associated with a cause or issue, such as conservation of whales, said Allison Rosner of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"I think there will be some draw from consumers," Rosner said.

Whale SENSE, sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in partnership with the nonprofit Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and several New England commercial whale watching companies, began in 2009 and is voluntary and free. It requires boat operators and naturalists with each whale-watch company to take annual training on safe operations and whale ecology. There are classes on passenger education, whale-watching guidelines and regulations, and good marine stewardship practices, such as cleaning up debris in the water or on beaches. Companies also must allow annual, onboard inspections so federal officials can see how the program is being implemented.

In return, the whale-watch companies that join Whale SENSE can use the program's logo for marketing, and their company names appear on the website www.WhaleSENSE.org.

Worldwide, the whale-watching industry is vibrant and growing, with about \$2.1 billion spent in 119 countries in 2008, according to a recent report by the International Fund for Animal Welfare. In New England, the most popular whale-watching location is Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, a 842-square-mile underwater plateau whose boundaries are about three miles north of Provincetown and 25 miles east of Boston. In 2008, about 910,000 tourists took boats to see whales in New England.

So far, a half-dozen out of 40 whale watch operators from Maine to Virginia have agreed to the standards and taken the annual Whale SENSE training, said Regina Asmutis-Silvia, senior biologist with the whale conservation society. Three of the companies are based on Cape Cod: Hyannis Whale Watcher Cruises in Barnstable Village, Dolphin Fleet of Provincetown and a second Provincetown whale watch company operating from a private pier, said Asmutis-Silvia. Other operators include Capt. John Boats in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Lines in Boston.

The program was patterned from Dolphin SMART, a program set up to help preserve wild dolphins in the Southeast, also sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in partnership with the whale conservation society.

"It brings the standard of whale watching to a different level," Bob Avila of Capt. John Boats said yesterday.

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