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NAUTICAL NEWS

Endangered blue whales spotted in local waters

By Pat Reynolds

Earlier this month I drove my 14-foot inflatable boat 10 to 15 miles down the coast to see if I could happen upon blue whales. I recognize that there aren't a lot of people in this world who could utter that sentence truthfully and am humbled that I am one.

On the way down I looked to my left at the beachfront homes so packed together, the Chevron oil refinery and the never-ending stream of jumbo jets flying overhead. I was happy to be away from the complication those things represent and curious to find out if I would see the largest animal on the planet feeding on its life source, krill, just a short distance away.

It was a weekday; I was alone and glad to be. Since the blue whales started finding their way towards this area a few years ago, the boating community, kayaking enthusiasts, jet skiers and paddleboarders have all been understandably excited at the sudden presence of not only the largest animal on the planet but the largest that has ever lived, including dinosaurs. The excitement is more than justified.

It's beyond seeing a being so physically incredible in its natural environment - the blue was hunted to near extinction 100 years ago, thereby their population has been very much depleted, making these sightings particularly rare in the grand scheme of things. But now, as the blues seem to be returning season after season, there are concerns that some onlookers are getting too close and interacting inappropriately.

Local marine scientist Maddalena Bearzi of the Ocean Conservation Society is quick to remind local boaters and sightseers that whales are a protected species.

"Many people don't know that these whales are protected or that getting too close can potentially cause harm to these magnificent and endangered animals," Bearzi said. "Whales and dolphins are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and boaters and whale watchers need to pay careful attention when approaching whales. It's a violation of federal law to harass or harm them and penalties can include up to one year imprisonment and fines of up to \$20,000."

Bearzi and other marine mammal experts are torn in a certain way. On the one hand public awareness and exposure to animals like the blue lead to a more educated and compassionate populace, which leads to an easier time raising

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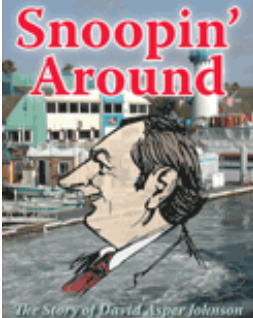
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PROMPT, ATTENTIVE

runds and passing legislation that will ultimately protect them, they say. However, seeing YouTube videos of paddleboarders with GoPro cameras strapped to their heads directly on top of a feeding endangered blue whale is something that can make their collective heads explode.

As I reached the area where sightings have been reported, I saw a Los Angeles County lifeguard boat drifting easily. I wondered why they were there - there didn't seem to be a reason for lifeguards to be on site. I waved, and a moment later two massive blue whales surfaced nearly simultaneously, maybe 200 feet from my diminutive boat and blew mist 30 feet in the air - in stereo.

My heart raced; I felt small, out of my element and in awe. What seemed to be a mother and calf were peacefully feeding off the cliffs of Palos Verdes. A third whale presented itself later, and for a few hours I watched this trio surfacing and diving - foraging for the tiny crustaceans that give them sustenance.

I thought about how advances in technology had nearly eradicated their bloodline. I read that one year in the 1930s, 30,000 of them were killed and that 99 percent of them were eliminated by the whaling industry. The American Cetacean Society currently estimates there are 5,000-10,000 blue whales in the Southern Hemisphere, and only around 3-4,000 in the Northern Hemisphere.

It felt good to be alone as I watched these creatures that day. There was a meditative sanctity to the experience that I wish for others to get the privilege. While it's understandable to want to get as close as possible, jump off the kayak and point the camera in the blue whale's eye, experts wish and hope that people will be less aggressive and allow these creatures to go about their business unfettered.

Here are the basic guidelines of appropriate behavior in the company of whales as published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration:.

Vessels should not be operated at speeds faster than a whale or group of whales while paralleling them within 100 yards;

Vessels should be operated at a constant speed while paralleling or following whales within 100 yards;

Vessels should do nothing to cause a whale to change direction; and

Aircraft should not fly lower than 1,000 feet while within a horizontal distance of 100 yards from a whale.

Generally, a whale's normal behavior should not be interrupted. Such annoyance may cause a whale to change its direction rapidly, swim faster, or swim in an erratic pattern. To interrupt a whale's normal activity constitutes harassment and is against the law. ✕

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