

Southern Resident Killer Whale Indigenous and Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group

June 24 2022

From: Vanessa Craig, AVICC representative on the SRKW IMAG

RE: Updates on the SRKW IMAG

Dear AVICC Executive and AVICC members,

I have been the AVICC's representative on the Southern Resident Killer Whale Indigenous and Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group since April 2021. Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW) are listed as Endangered in Canada and the US; there are only 73 individuals in the population, including a new calf born in March. Due to their Endangered status, there are a series of recovery actions that have been identified to address risks and threats, and to help support the population. The SRKW IMAG is an advisory group to the (primarily) federal entities that are establishing Measures to recover the SRKW and includes Indigenous representatives as well as representatives from the provincial government, commercial and recreational fishers and boaters, whale watching companies, local government, researchers, US government, environmental groups and others.

I've represented AVICC at multiple SRKW IMAG meetings. At each meeting representatives from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Transport Canada, and the Port of Vancouver provided updates on Measures designed to protect SRKW and their habitat. In addition, there was one very interesting seminar workshop where research findings on SRKW foraging and movement and research on salmon populations were provided. The focus of the SRKW IMAG meetings is for government representatives to provide information on relevant research (eg updated information on where SRKW are foraging, acoustic impacts and effects of contaminants), to provide an analysis of the success of the previous year's protection measures, to provide information on the suite of proposed measures for the upcoming year, and to hear feedback from members of the IMAG. The protection measures are finalized taking the feedback in to account, and then the revised measures that will be implemented for that year are presented in a subsequent meeting. During the most recent meeting, on May 2nd, the measures that will be in effect this year were presented (pdf attached).

Summary:

- Due to the imminent risks to the population, a suite of enhanced measures were identified to support recovery of the population including (these measures as well as maps showing the location of closures is provided in the attached pdf):
 - Seasonal closures to recreational and commercial fishing in specific zones known to be important for SRKW foraging and/or high use areas. The closures are implemented once killer whales have been detected in the area. The closure areas are updated based on the most recent scientific research conducted. Monitoring for killer whales (through echo sounders and visual surveys) began on May 5th this year (which is earlier than in previous years). Based on a detection the closures were implemented on May 27th and will continue until October 31st;
 - Voluntary fishing avoidance zones - encourages fishers to stop fishing when within 1000 m of a killer whale;
 - Salmon enhancement of Pacific salmon including release of hatchery Chinook;

- Protection and enhancement of habitat quality and connectivity;
- Implementing seasonal slowdown areas or restricting fishing and boating in specific areas (as of June 1st through to November 30th);
- Mandatory year-round requirement to stay minimum 400m away from any killer whale within a large section of the coast. This is typically called the “approach distance” – I and others commented that by using this term it could be viewed as encouraging approaching a whale and that perhaps calling it a 400 m “exclusion zone” might be more reflective of the intent. DFO indicated this wording is used in marine mammal regulations so they use it to be consistent. However, in communication with the public they often use language such as “stay x m away” to try and be more clear;
- Coast-wide voluntary measures requesting that boats reduce speed when within 1000 m of a killer whale, and where safe to do so, turning off echo sounders and fish finders and placing the boat in neutral when within 400 m of a killer whale;
- A wide range of research initiatives that address underwater noise, marine traffic modifications, a licensing system for commercial whale watching and modifying the allowable approach distance to whales.

How to support these Measures to protect Southern Resident Killer Whales

- Review the maps (in the attached pdf) showing sanctuary zones and protected areas – there are new areas that have been added in 2022, and some areas from 2021 have been refined. Identify important areas near your municipality and/or electoral area
- Share information with residents and visitors to your area about these requirements. NOTE that a topic that was discussed during the meetings was that visiting recreational boaters/fishers may not be familiar with the restrictions in your area – this has been reported to be an issue with US visitors around the southern Gulf Islands as well as the northern island. Can the information be shared with marinas or other locations where visitors might stop in?
- Share the fact that commercial whale watching vessels that have permission to be within 200 m of killer whales will be flying a purple flag with “AV” on it – the presence of a boat with a purple flag close to a whale indicates that they have special permission to approach and does not mean that other boats may also approach whales. A picture is available here: <https://www.bewhalewise.org/know-the-flags/>
- Share the fact that some boaters are using a “whale warning flag” to indicate that there is a whale within 1 km of a boat. This is a signal to be aware and to reduce boat speed and if possible turn off fish finders – picture here <https://www.bewhalewise.org/know-the-flags/>

Resources

- To report a violation of the Measures – Fisheries and Ocean’s Canada Observe and Report Line 1-800-465-4336
- For more information about Killer Whales, these Measures to protect SRKW, information about research, information about efforts to conserve Pacific salmon as well as brochures and other information, see <https://www.pac.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/fm-gp/mammals-mammiferes/whales-baleines/killer-whale-epaulard-eng.html>

I have enjoyed participating on the SRKW IMAG and I appreciate the appointment. I have been impressed by the amount of research that is ongoing on the movements and behaviour of SRKW and I hope that complementary research on ways to reduce underwater noise caused by ships and other research on ways to minimize ship and whale interactions will result in useful recommendations.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions about my participation on the SRKW IMAG.

Respectfully submitted,

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