



DAN COYRO/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

A humpback whale spouts while paddle boarders and boaters near the mile buoy Wednesday venture to get a closer look. The abundance of bait fish, along with the warm weather, is drawing the whales close to shore.

SANTA CRUZ

Whale watchers crowd in

By **Tovin Lapan**

Santa Cruz Sentinel

During the past week, conditions have aligned to make it for ideal whale watching.

Clear skies, warm weather, a relative lack of swell resulting in calm water and, perhaps most important, an abundance of bait fish have brought humpback whales close to shore.

Combined with news reports that showed whales breaching close to kayakers, the prime conditions have led to traffic jams of small boats within a mile of

the Santa Cruz coastline.

The crowded conditions have raised alarms about safety of both boaters and the marine mammals.

"It's like a circus event out there," said Kenny Stagnaro, who runs Stagnaro Sport Fishing, Charters and Whale Watching Cruises, after returning from a whale-watching excursion and seeing the volume of small crafts near the whales.

"I don't think it was disturbing the whales all that much, but the danger for people is incredible. A lot of people don't understand

the power of these animals. With a tail throw they could break a kayak or kill someone ... It's just not safe."

Stagnaro said he and other whale watching captains saw kayakers capsized by the powerful movements of the whales' tails in the past few days.

Monday kayak rental shops were doing steady business at the harbor. A pack of kayakers and other small boats could be seen in between the Municipal Wharf and the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor swarming to spots where whales were spotted.

Although the skipper kept his vessel a responsible distance away from much of the whale activity in the bay on Monday, the passengers of the Velocity got some up close viewing of the whales.

The humpback whales that are coming close to shore to feed are protected by the Endangered Species Act and the rules regarding the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, said Robert Yerena, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's enforcement officer for the sanctuary.

Whales and Whaling

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