



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

A pair of humpbacks surface near whale-watching kayakers off Seabright State Beach on Monday morning.

Humpbacks draw swarm of whale watchers to bay

Whales and Whaling
Near-shore encounters lead to traffic on water

By TOVIN LAPAN

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SANTA CRUZ — During the past week conditions have aligned to make for ideal whale watching.

Clear skies, warm weather, a relative lack of swell resulting in calm water and, perhaps most importantly, 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 in close proximity of the whales.



Two kayakers get an up-close and possibly risky encounter with the slap of a humpback's tail on Monday in the Monterey Bay.

"I don't think it was disturbing the whales all that much, but the danger for people is incredible," he said. "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 capsize by the powerful movements of the whales' tails in the past few days. His tours were booked full this past weekend, but space was available for tours this week.

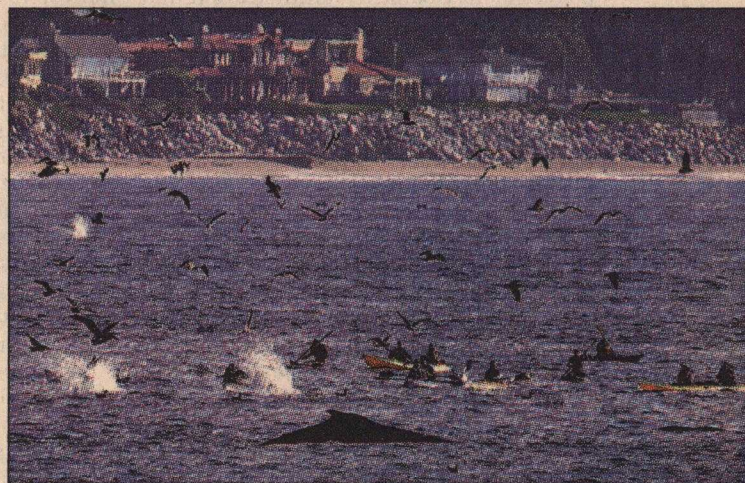
Kayak rental shops were doing steady business at the harbor Monday. A pack of kayakers and

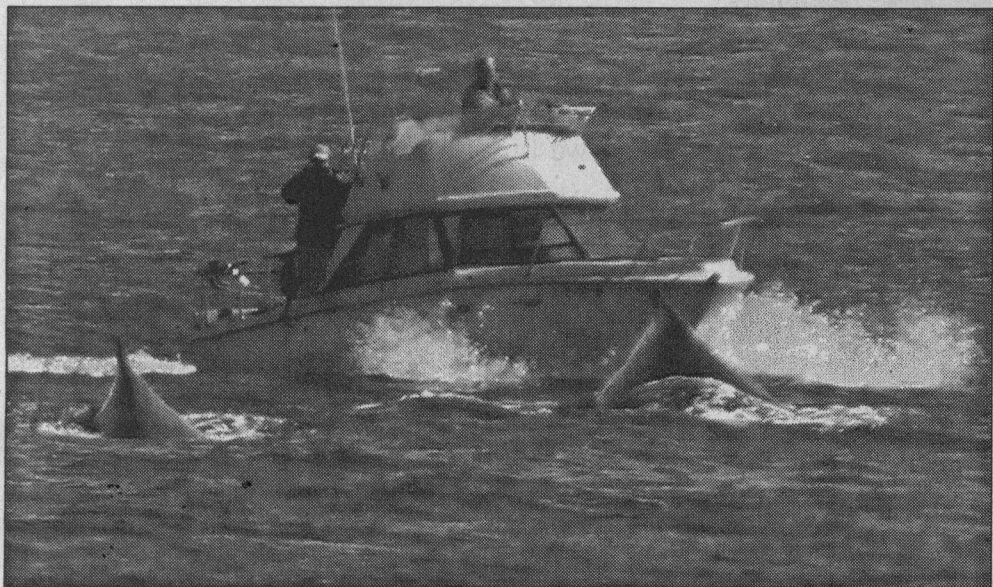
AT A GLANCE

RULES FOR OBSERVING WILDLIFE IN MONTEREY BAY NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

- Maintain a distance of 100 yards
- Do not pursue or cut off the path of wildlife
- Do not attempt to make physical contact
- The civil fine for harassment to wild life that has the potential to cause harm is between \$2,500 and \$11,500. The maximum civil fine for the most egregious situations is \$32,500.

SOURCE: Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary





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A boat speeds toward two humpbacks swimming in the bay off Seacliff State Beach on Monday.

WHALES

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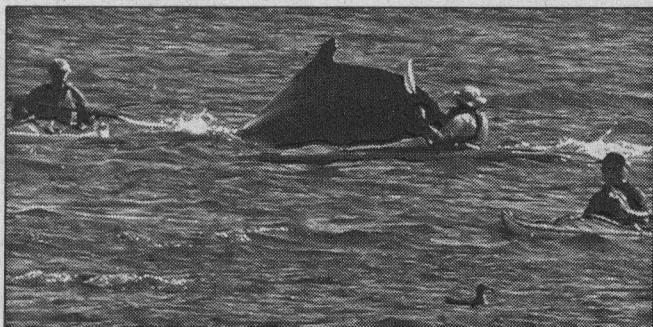
other small boats could be seen in between the Municipal Wharf and the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor swarming to spots where whales were spotted like bees following a child with a snow cone.

In the early afternoon Matt Chaney and Natalie Sharp readied a two-person kayak for launch from the west end of the harbor.

"Natalie's mom went out yesterday and said she saw whales and got within 10 feet of them," Chaney said. "We heard that a couple of kayakers got turned over this weekend so we plan to keep our distance and stay away from packs of other kayakers so we don't get hemmed in."

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

In general, whale watchers should stay back at least 100 yards from wildlife and should



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Kayakers maneuver around the massive form of a humpback as it surfaces close to Santa Cruz on Monday morning.

not interfere with the marine mammals' movements.

Even when boaters observe the rules, it can be hard to predict when and where a whale will surface.

A small sailboat from the UC Santa Cruz boating center was out on the bay following protocol Friday when a humpback whale suddenly emerged underneath it, lifted the boat a couple feet in the air and then dropped it back down.

"We've been really careful to keep our distance and make sure everyone is following regulations," said Rusty Kington, UCSC boating director, who added that there was minor damage to the vessel. "We are trying to run classes and not get caught up with whale watchers."

Stagnaro said he received a call from NOAA before the weekend asking him to help enforce the rules while he was out on the water. He said he was "disappointed" that no marine sanctuary boats were out this weekend to maintain safe conditions on the water.

"I went out Friday, but not Saturday or Sunday," Yarena said. "We only have one enforcement officer for all 276 miles of coastline in the sanctuary. I do plan to be out Tuesday in the boat."

Santa Cruz Harbor Patrol has been intercepting people before they go out on the water and sent its boat into the bay this past weekend to help inform whale watchers of the regulations, said Ryan Catterlin, harbor operations assistant.