

ONMS Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Vessel Operations

All ONMS vessels must comply with the operational protocols and procedures in the NOAA Small Boats Policy (NAO 209-125). In addition, the following BMP's, which ONMS intends to include in the PEAs, are used as applicable by vessels during ONMS related operations:

Lookouts/Staying at the helm

- While underway, vessel operators should always stay alert for marine mammals, sea turtles, and other collision hazards.
- While transiting in areas where marine mammals and sea turtles are likely to occur, vessel operators should post a minimum of one dedicated lookout and operators should remain vigilant at the helm controls (keeping hands on the wheel and throttle at all times) and be ready to take action immediately to avoid an animal in their path.
- When operating in areas where marine mammals and sea turtles are present, a dedicated lookout is required in addition to the operator. A second lookout may be posted in circumstances where visibility is restricted.
- When marine mammals are riding the bow wake, or porpoising nearby, operators should exercise caution and take actions that avoid possible contact or collisions.
- When operating within visual range of whales, vessel operators should follow NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Whale Watching guidelines unless otherwise covered by a NMFS permit, and only then with extreme caution.

Vessel Speed

- All vessels must reduce to prudent speed when marine mammals and sea turtles are visible within 1 nautical mile (nm) of the vessel and should not exceed 10 knots.

Maintaining Distance

- Once large whales¹ are sighted, vessel operators should stay at least 100 yards away, 200 yards away from killer whales and 50 yards away from sea turtles.
- If large whales surface within 100 yards, vessel operators should stop immediately and use prudent seamanship to decide to either move away slowly or wait for the animal to move away on its own.
- In the case of North Atlantic right whales, a distance of at least 500 yards should be maintained per [NMFS regulations](#).

Towing Divers

¹ For the purposes of this document, large whales include: blue, bowhead, bryde's, fin, grey, humpback, minke, right, sei, and sperm whales. [Information based on Marine Wildlife Laws & Guidelines for Boaters, Paddlers and Viewers](#)

- Divers will be towed at approximately 3 kts/hour.

Operation of vessels during daylight hours

- Due to the increased risk of collision at night, vessel operations, whenever possible, should be planned for daylight hours (*i.e.*, between ½ hour before sunrise and ½ hour after sunset when possible).
- Restricted visibility can hinder an operator's ability to see and respond to a marine mammals and sea turtles. Prudent seamanship should be applied, including posting an additional lookout when there is the potential for marine animals in the vicinity.

Operation of vessels during night hours

- Standing Order for Nighttime Operations – If night time operations are essential and integral to the mission, the principal investigator must discuss mitigations for avoiding whales and other objects within the vessel operation corridor and incorporate them into the cruise plan. Mitigation measures could include: speed restrictions, additional lookouts, use of navigation lights, and use of sound signals, etc.

Standing Order for Operations around Marine Mammals

- This order requires several precautionary measures such as: incorporating whale sighting information in cruise planning, slowing to 10 kts in a Seasonal or Dynamic Management Area, following the Whale Watching Guidelines, maintaining a constant lookout for whales, and following specific procedures if a whale is struck.

Anchoring and deployment of instruments

- In the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico region, anchoring will be limited to sandy-bottom substrates to avoid damage to seagrasses and coral habitat.
- In the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico region, sargassum interaction is limited, as much as is reasonable feasible, to prevent impact on sea turtle hatchling habitat.
- In general, instruments are deployed and lowered onto sandy substrate whenever possible; deployment of instruments occurs slowly and under constant supervision to minimize risk and mitigate impacts if a collision or entanglement occurs; and while vehicles or personnel are deployed, spotters monitor the activities at all times.

Safety

- Safety Briefings: All ONMS vessel captains include safety information during pre-cruise briefings for staff and volunteers.
- All divers working on ONMS vessels are diver-certified.