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NOAA LAUNCHES SUMMER 'SPLASH' - WEST COAST WHALE RESEARCH CRUISE

The NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary System and NOAA Fisheries Service today launched a summer West Coast research cruise continuing the single largest whale survey ever undertaken to assess humpback whale populations throughout the North Pacific Ocean. The project is called SPLASH (Structures of Populations, Levels of Abundance and Status of Humpbacks.) NOAA is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

SPLASH surveys along the west coast of the U.S. will be conducted with an emphasis on coverage in the five national marine sanctuaries in California and Washington. Research, primarily with small vessels, has begun in Channel Islands, Monterey Bay, Gulf of the Farallones and Cordell Bank national marine sanctuaries, all in California.

Early summer SPLASH observations from the NOAA ship *McArthur II* were recorded this month in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary off the coast of Washington. NOAA is partnering with Cascadia Research, a non-profit research organization in Olympia, Wash., to coordinate the West Coast survey effort.

"There is a substantial population of humpback whales off the west coast of the U.S.," said Richard Spinrad, NOAA's National Ocean Service assistant administrator. "These studies will give us important information on how they are recovering from the population pressures that resulted from whaling hunting through the mid-1960s, and what threats they currently face. Our long-term goal is to recover the species to a viable, self-sustaining population throughout its range."

Surveys will take place simultaneously in all the known humpback whale feeding areas in the North Pacific. In addition to the surveys conducted off the west coast of the U.S., others will be conducted off British Columbia by Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans, in coastal waters of Alaska and in Russian waters by Russian scientists.

Additional SPLASH research will take place during current NOAA research efforts to identify and count marine mammals and seabirds along the West Coast on the NOAA ships *David Starr Jordan* and *McArthur II.*

The west coast humpback whale research marks the launch of the 2005 summer portion of SPLASH, a three-year project begun in early 2004 involving NOAA scientists and hundreds of other researchers from the United States, Japan, Russia, Mexico, Canada, the Philippines, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala. This is the first systematic survey ever attempted to determine the humpback whales' overall population, structure, and genetic makeup as well as effects of human interaction such as ship strikes or net entanglement scars.

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Researchers quantify the number of humpback whales by photographing the animal's tail, or fluke. The pigmentation patterns on the fluke act like a fingerprint, unique to each animal. Scientists determine population numbers by comparing photographs taken in northern feeding grounds with those from the southern breeding areas. Small amounts of tissue will also be obtained to study genetic information including population structure, genetic variability, and overall health.

Humpback whales in the North Pacific Ocean feed near the Arctic in the summer and travel up to 3,000 miles to warmer southern tropical waters in the winter to breed and give birth to their young. The SPLASH project has surveyed the breeding areas for this year and will use this cruise to document humpback whales in their feeding areas in the northern latitudes.

Humpback whales were nearly driven to extinction before an international ban on whaling was adopted in 1964. They were listed as an endangered species in 1973 and remain protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) manages the National Marine Sanctuary System, which includes 13 national marine sanctuaries and one coral reef ecosystem reserve that encompass more than 150,000 square miles of America's ocean and Great Lakes natural and cultural resources. The ONMS seeks to increase the public awareness of America's maritime heritage by conducting scientific research, monitoring, exploration and educational programs.

The National Ocean Service manages the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, and balances environmental protection with economic prosperity in fulfilling its mission of promoting safe navigation, supporting coastal communities, sustaining coastal habitats and mitigating coastal hazards.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to providing and preserving the nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through research to better understand atmospheric and climate variability and to manage wisely our nation's coastal and marine resources.

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NOAA Fisheries SPLASH:
http://swfsc.nmfs.noaa.gov/prd/PROJECTS/splash/default.htm
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Cascadia Research: http://www.CascadiaResearch.org/SPLASH/splash.htm