



# Guidelines for Marine Vessel Operations Near Pacific Walrus Haulouts in Bristol Bay

*Please Do Not Disturb!*

There are five regularly used walrus haulouts in Bristol Bay, located at Round Island and Hagemeister Islands and Capes Peirce, Newenham, and Seniavin. During the months of May through December, walrus may be encountered in the water and resting on land in these areas. Round Island is part of the State of Alaska Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary and has developed regulations specific to state waters in that area. The guidelines listed here do not supersede or amend the regulations adopted by the State of Alaska for Round Island and mariners need to make themselves aware of those regulations when in the vicinity of the Sanctuary.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibits the TAKE of all marine mammal species in U.S. waters. TAKE is defined as “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal.” Harassment is defined under the MMPA as “any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild; or has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering.” TAKE is further defined by regulation to include feeding or attempting to feed a marine mammal in the wild. Some exceptions are made for authorized scientific research and subsistence hunting by Alaska Natives.

Marine mammals swimming or hauled out on land, rock or ice are sensitive to boats, and human presence. Noises, smells, and sights may elicit a flight reaction. Trampling deaths associated with haulout disturbance are among the largest known sources of natural mortality for walrus. Frequent or



*Pacific walrus fleeing a terrestrial haulout in response to human induced disturbance.*

prolonged disturbances may even result in long term haulout abandonment. Your vessel may not be the only one that day that has interacted with a particular group of walrus, please be aware that increasing levels of disturbance may occur with each successive interaction.

Signs of disturbance to animals hauled out on the beach may include any of the following behaviors (generally listed in increasing intensity of disturbance):

- Several individuals raising their heads simultaneously
- Increased vocalizations
- Increased interactions among individuals in the herd
- Aggressive behavior by animals towards the disturbance
- Movement towards the water
- Hurried entry into the water

Much of the disturbance that impacts marine mammals in the water is related to underwater sound produced by a vessel’s engines and propellers.

Cautiously move away from the animals if you observe any of the following behaviors:

- Rapid changes in direction or swimming speed
- Erratic swimming patterns
- Grouping up and “head bobbing” to investigate the source of the disturbance
- Escape tactics such as prolonged diving, underwater exhalation, underwater course changes, or rapid swimming at the surface
- Females attempting to shield a calf with her body or by her movements

## GUIDELINES FOR VESSEL OPERATIONS

Marine motor vessels should maintain a separation buffer from walrus haulouts hauled out on land or ice to avoid disturbance. Mariners should assume that known walrus haulouts will be occupied. Mariners should also note that state waters (0 – 3 nautical miles) around Round Island, within the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary are closed to all access without prior authorization under state regulations.

- Marine vessels 50 feet in length or less should remain at least a 0.5 nautical mile away from hauled out walrus.
- Marine vessels 50 - 100 feet in length should remain at least 1 nautical mile away from hauled out walrus.
- Marine vessels greater than 100 feet in length should remain at least 3 nautical miles away from hauled out walrus.

- All vessels should refrain from anchoring, or conducting tendering or fishing operations within 3 miles of hauled out walrus.

Sound carries a long way across the water and often reverberates off of cliffs and bluffs adjacent to walrus haulouts amplifying the level of noise. Reduce noise levels near haulouts. Avoid sudden changes in engine noise, using loud speakers, loud deck equipment or other operations that produce noise when in the vicinity of walrus haulouts.

Vessels traveling in a predictable manner appear to be less disturbing to swimming walrus. Avoid excessive speed or sudden changes in speed or direction when approaching or departing walrus haulout areas. Vessel operators should take every precaution to avoid harassment of

concentrations of feeding or swimming walrus. Vessels should reduce speed and maintain a minimum 0.5 - nautical mile exclusion zone around feeding walrus. Vessels may not be operated in such a way as to separate members of a group of walrus from other members of the group. When weather conditions require, such as when visibility drops, vessels should adjust speed accordingly to avoid the likelihood of injury to walrus.

Harassment or pursuit of marine mammals is prohibited by law. Never attempt to herd, chase, or separate groups of walrus.



*The Five Regularly Used Pacific Walrus Haulouts in Bristol Bay*

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