



# Whale SENSE Atlantic Region Program Framework for 2023

*Sections with an asterisk\* indicate a substantive update for this year.*

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## **Whale SENSE Program Coordinators**

Program coordinators are the primary points of contact for information or questions in regards to enrollment, completing program requirements, program recognition, and requesting program materials.

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## **Whale SENSE Program Partners**

All program partners work collaboratively to ensure the program runs efficiently, review and provide input on program materials, conduct company evaluations, and designate staff to act as liaisons with select Whale SENSE companies.

[NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office](#), [Whale and Dolphin Conservation](#), [Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary](#), [Audubon Society of Rhode Island](#), and [New Bedford Whaling Museum](#)



## I. Program Overview

- A. The mission of Whale SENSE is to promote responsible stewardship of whales in the Greater Atlantic<sup>1</sup> region and to recognize commercial whale watching companies that set positive standards for responsible practices and education.
- B. This program is voluntary and offered to participating companies at no charge.
- C. Businesses conducting dedicated commercial whale watching tours from the Greater Atlantic region (ME to VA) will be eligible for Whale SENSE participation.
- D. Participating companies who have met the program requirements as specified by the framework (see below) will be included on the list of program participants on the Whale SENSE website and may use the Whale SENSE logo in their advertisements.
- E. The program partners to this agreement are the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (NOAA), Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary (SBNMS), Audubon Society of Rhode Island (ASRI), and New Bedford Whaling Museum (NBWM). Although they are not program partners, it is important to note that the program was developed in collaboration with Greater Atlantic whale watching companies. Whale watching companies continue to play a significant role in the development and advancement of the Whale SENSE program.
- F. The purpose of this program is to:
- Empower whale watching industry leadership to serve as conservation stewards for whale species;
  - Minimize the potential harassment of whales that may result from commercial viewing activities;
  - Manage expectations of members of the public arising from wanting to closely interact with whales in a manner that may cause harassment (e.g., pressuring commercial vessels to intentionally approach animals in a manner that does not adhere to NOAA's Greater Atlantic Regional Whale Watching Guidelines);
  - Educate potential whale watchers on whale protection and conservation measures, including guidelines, regulations, and laws applicable to responsible whale watching;
  - Reduce the potential causes of whale harassment in the Greater Atlantic region that may result from inexperienced or aggressive operators maneuvering vessels around whales.
  - Improve awareness about whale behavior and signs of disturbance;

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<sup>1</sup> The "Greater Atlantic" region refers to northeast and mid-Atlantic states, from Maine through Virginia.



- Increase reliable and consistent educational messaging to whale watch passengers;
- Ensure participating whale watching companies emphasize a conservative, respectful and educated approach to whale watching; and
- Promote the Whale SENSE program's commitment to responsible whale watching practices, whale conservation and ocean stewardship.

***Whale SENSE is an education and public awareness program, not a law enforcement program. Any suspected violations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), Endangered Species Act (ESA), or other laws will continue to be dealt with through the appropriate law enforcement agency.***

## **II. Program Objectives**

- A. The goal of program partners is to develop a voluntary education and recognition program for commercial operators to increase their awareness and knowledge, and ultimately that of their customers, about responsible marine mammal viewing practices, whale behavior and biology/ecology, the laws and guidelines protecting whales, and stewardship of the marine environment. This in turn will provide a quality experience for passengers aboard participating operators. Objectives in support of this goal are as follows:
- 1) Program partners will develop criteria that will assist participants in achieving compliance with legal requirements, policies, and guidelines, as well as best practices aimed at preventing harassment of whales.
  - 2) Program partners will develop outreach and education materials to ensure participants' awareness of the issues surrounding whale conservation and how to promote whale conservation by preventing harassment.
  - 3) Program criteria will promote marine stewardship and ocean literacy.
  - 4) Program partners will determine the program's overall effectiveness in the Greater Atlantic region by developing an evaluation component to measure adherence to the program criteria.
  - 5) Program partners will establish a platform for public recognition of companies complying with the program criteria.



### III. Criteria for Whale SENSE Recognition<sup>2 3</sup>

#### A. Provide educational content onboard vessel

- 1) Naturalists/interpreters/narrators from participating companies will brief passengers on each trip about the Whale SENSE program. It is recommended that the briefing include:
  - i) What the program is;
  - ii) What it means to have “SENSE”, as described in the acronym
  - iii) Who the program partners are; and
  - iv) Where to obtain additional educational information about the Whale SENSE program and species of interest.

This can be a brief or of longer duration, depending on a naturalist's individual style and preference. As an example, an announcement could be made that could go something like this: “As we head out of the harbor to begin our trip, we’d like to let you know that our company participates in a program called Whale SENSE. This voluntary education and recognition program for commercial whale watching companies promotes responsible marine mammal viewing and stewardship of the marine environment. It’s a partnership between regional conservation and government partners, with input from whale-watch captains and naturalists. As members of the program, our company follows certain guidelines like slowing our speed, managing our time near whales, and communicating with other operators. If you’re interested in learning more, feel free to ask me about Whale SENSE during our trip.” (When read aloud, this sample narrative runs under a minute.)

- 2) At some point during the trip, naturalists should also identify and explain applicable marine mammal protection laws and the purpose and importance of viewing regulations/guidelines to passengers onboard each trip. For North Atlantic right whale encounters, naturalists should explain NOAA Fisheries’ North Atlantic Right Whale Approach Regulations.

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<sup>2</sup> Participation in the Whale SENSE Program does not create any right to renewal and does not represent a waiver by NOAA to seek penalties that are provided by law if law violations are discovered, nor does it imply that the vessel complies with the United States Coast Guard safety inspection or other applicable safety and insurance requirements. Passengers are encouraged to ask businesses if they maintain current inspection, license, and insurance documentation.

<sup>3</sup> For Charter businesses that take customers to view whales but also conduct other types of charters, such as fishing trips and ferry services: Whale SENSE participants agree to follow the program criteria if they encounter whales, even if they are running another type of charter when the encounter occurs.



- 3) Participating companies may request onboard resources to augment their onboard briefing, as described in Section VII of this Framework.

## **B. Comply with applicable laws**

- 1) Participating companies will ensure that all operations comply with all applicable resource protection laws and regulations (e.g. Marine Mammal Protection Act, Endangered Species Act, Right Whale Approach Regulations, Right Whale Ship Strike Reduction Speed Restrictions.)

## **C. Report whales in distress and live right whale sightings to the appropriate networks**

- 1) Participants agree to report vessel struck, stranded, injured, dead, or entangled marine mammals to NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Region Marine Animal Hotline: 1-866-755-NOAA (6622), local stranding or disentanglement network partners, or US Coast Guard via CH-16. When possible, and at the request of the responding agency, stand-by and keep the animal in sight or arrange for another vessel to maintain sight of the animal.
- 2) Participants are encouraged to report Marine Mammal Protection Act and/or Endangered Species Act violations to NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement's hotline: 1-800-853-1964.
- 3) Participants will keep important contact information readily available in the wheelhouse. Program coordinators can supply resources with this information upon request at no cost.

## **D. Follow NOAA's policies, guidelines, and recommendations to prevent harassment**

- 1) Follow NOAA Fisheries' policy statement on marine mammal harassment: "*Interacting with wild marine mammals should not be attempted, and viewing marine mammals must be conducted in a manner that does not harass the animals. NOAA Fisheries cannot support, condone, approve or authorize activities that involve closely approaching, interacting or attempting to interact with whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals or sea lions in the wild. This includes attempting to swim with, pet, touch, or elicit a reaction from the animals.*"
- 2) Use best practices and follow [NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic regional marine mammal viewing guidelines](#) to the best of the vessel's operational ability, including but not limited to approach, drone use, and compliance with voluntary speed reduction zones.



- 3) Post a graphic, placard, poster, or brochure of NOAA's [Greater Atlantic Whale Watching Guidelines](#) describing whale watching guidelines and their overall purpose in an area accessible for public viewing. Naturalists should direct their passenger's attention to these materials. Program coordinators will supply these materials upon request at no cost.
- 4) Whale SENSE objectives should not be compromised if the company also participates in other business activities such as ferry or fishing services. Companies agree to uphold a standard of responsible practices and code of conduct if marine mammals are viewed during these additional activities. Participants agree to adhere to responsible marine mammal protection practices applicable to the other businesses (for example: [Fishing Tips to Protect Sea Turtles and Marine Mammals](#)).

#### **E. Exceed standards specified by law, policies, and guidelines to promote stewardship\***

- 1) Participants will create and/or participate in at least one project exemplifying marine stewardship.
  - a) Projects are unique to each company but must be linked to NOAA's [Ocean Literacy Principles](#), and accompanied by a Whale SENSE-approved take home message for passengers.
  - b) When enrolling for the season, the participating company will notify program coordinators of their stewardship project. Whale SENSE coordinators will assist the participant in identifying, designing, and crafting messaging for stewardship projects if requested. Examples of projects may include (but are not limited to):
    - Participation in marine debris and beach clean-ups;
    - Onboard recycling programs;
    - Commitment to stop and collect marine debris during whale watching trips;
    - Sponsorship of internship programs;
    - Providing a consistent and documented research platform for marine mammal researchers from accredited academic institutions, federal or state agencies, or non-profit organizations<sup>4</sup>;
    - Hosting educational talks at public venues, such as libraries and schools; or
    - Creating a new stewardship project (prior approval required from Whale SENSE partners)
  - d) Each company must detail at least one method of communicating their stewardship project to passengers, as well as provide updates on the project's progress to Whale SENSE partners before the

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<sup>4</sup> Companies will be required to provide names and contact details for affiliated organizations if this is the designated stewardship project.



end of the season. Example methods of communication may include (but are not limited to):

- Scripted narration for each naturalist to include during trips, talking about the project and why it's important;
- Social media posts on company's applicable platforms;
- Printed materials onboard that are accessible to passengers; or
- Dedicated page, or section, on the company's website detailing their project and why it's important.

## **G. Participate in Whale SENSE training**

- 1) Participating operators/captains and naturalists/interpreters/narrators (herein referred to as captains and naturalists, respectively) must participate in training provided by the program partners to attain an accurate knowledge standard on laws protecting marine mammals, marine mammal viewing etiquette, animal behavior (including recognizing signs of disturbance), research and conservation messaging, anthropogenic interaction, and reporting wildlife in distress.
- 2) Designated company point of contact (POC) must ensure all naturalists and captains will be trained according to program standards detailed in Section III Paragraph B of this Framework. The Whale SENSE partners will provide access to the training and any necessary materials to participants to ensure that all company captains and naturalists will be trained according to the program standards.

## **H. Engage in responsible advertising<sup>5 6 7</sup>**

- 1) Participants agree to engage in advertising that promotes responsible wildlife viewing and follows NOAA Fisheries [Recommendations for Advertising Wild Marine Mammal Viewing](#):

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<sup>5</sup> "Advertising" includes any print or electronic advertisements that mention the business's name or those linked to the business, search engine listings, and any posted photos. This also includes, but is not limited to, pitch sheets, print, web, visual, and radio. Flexibility will be given to new companies that enrolled after their seasonal brochures are printed. In these cases, meeting these criteria will only be applied to electronic sources (i.e. websites, social media sites, etc.).

<sup>6</sup> The advertising guidelines are intended to help participants advertise responsible marine mammal viewing by avoiding advertisements that raise the public's expectation to engage in inappropriate, close human interactions with marine mammals.

<sup>7</sup> Participants will be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the Federal Trade Commission's rules for "[truth-in-advertising](#)" to ensure advertisements are truthful and non-deceptive about marine mammal viewing experiences. Participation in this program does not ensure adherence to the Federal Trade Commission's advertising policies.



- a) Do not depict people touching, pursuing, chasing, attempting to swim with, or closely interacting with wild marine mammals or any activities that would violate the MMPA or ESA or other regulatory measures.
- b) Do not show vessels underway within close approach zones (e.g. vessels with wakes within 300-100 feet of whales) and no vessel wake should be visible within 0.5 miles of a known location of a whale.
- c) In advertisements with stationary, close approach pictures, include a prepared statement or photo caption on the product or website where the image is displayed about responsible whale viewing. An example caption for you to use is: “As a proud member of Whale SENSE (whalesense.org), we are committed to responsible whale watching practices. All photos were taken in compliance with established guidelines and regulations.”
- d) Right whales will not be shown in images with vessels within 500 yards.
- e) If right whale images (i.e. whale with no boat) are used, a photo caption referencing the 500 yard approach restriction must be included.

## **I. Promote the Whale SENSE Program\***

- 1) Participants will help promote the Whale SENSE program by posting Whale SENSE annual placards (to be provided by coordinators at no cost) onboard each vessel, ticket booth, and souvenir shop . Additional placards will be provided and are strongly encouraged to be posted, including the [company creed](#) and [passenger survey](#) placards. Naturalists should direct their passenger’s attention to these materials.
- 2) Participants will link their company website to the Whale SENSE website ([www.whalesense.org](http://www.whalesense.org)) and display their digital Whale SENSE participant logo (provided by coordinators).

## **J. Engage in the feedback process\***

- 1) Participants agree to provide constructive feedback to program partners before, during, and after each season.
- 2) Participants agree to participate in an annual end-of-the-year feedback call.
- 3) Participants agree to be paired with a Whale SENSE Liaison, a Whale SENSE partner that will touch



base before, during, and after the season to verify requirements are being met, request company information for social media/website promotion, and to ensure Whale SENSE is offering the best support it can as questions, concerns, or issues arise.

## **K. Participate in annual evaluation**

- 1) Participating companies agree to participate in annual evaluation processes described in Section IV of this Framework.
- 2) The program evaluation will assess Whale SENSE's effectiveness and measure the program's success in meeting the program objectives.

## **III. Process for Program Participation**

### **A. Initiating participation\***

- 1) A business owner or manager should communicate their interest in becoming a Whale SENSE participant to one of the Whale SENSE coordinators or on the [Whale SENSE website](#). Whale SENSE coordinators will provide the business owner or manager with a checklist of Whale SENSE program components and criteria, as well as materials to help the business prepare for an initial discussion before partners confirm the company's eligibility to participate.
- 2) If Whale SENSE partners approve the company to join the program, the business owner or manager will be asked to complete a form to provide their company's details and ensure the company's commitment to meeting the program criteria.
- 3) After receiving this information, Whale SENSE partners will work with the company's designated point of contact(s) to schedule an initial Whale SENSE training session (in-person when possible) for staff, prior to or no later than one month after the company's whale watching season begins. Alternative training options will be provided for additional staff members that begin working later in the season. As a component of each training session, staff will be asked to complete a training evaluation distributed by WDC which will be used to assess the training's effectiveness.
- 4) Whale SENSE partners will review the participating company's website and social media platforms



to ensure all advertising follows program criteria.

- 5) Following the training, Whale SENSE coordinators will work with company management to schedule an initial evaluation. A Whale SENSE partner will:
  - i) meet with the company's Whale SENSE point of contact at the business site on a mutually convenient date to review the evaluation checklist.
  - ii) observe a complete whale watching tour to make sure the captains, naturalists and other staff (when applicable) understand the program criteria (see evaluation criteria [here](#)).
  - iii) compile all evaluation components.
  - iv) provide initial evaluation results to the participating company.
- 6) Following successful completion of the initial evaluation and training, the company will become an official Whale SENSE participant. The participant will then receive recognition materials (see Section III paragraph C below for more details) from the program coordinators and will be included, as feasible, on all Whale SENSE materials and websites.
- 7) If the company does not meet all program criteria following the initial evaluation, the Whale SENSE coordinators will meet with the business to provide suggestions on how to best align their practices with the program criteria. Whale SENSE partners will provide technical assistance whenever possible. After reviewing the evaluation and making any suggested changes, if company management wishes to continue Whale SENSE participation, they must contact a Whale SENSE coordinator to arrange for a re-evaluation, to be scheduled no later than two weeks after the request is made<sup>8</sup>.

## **B. Renewing participation\***

- 1) Recognition materials, such as vessel decals that publicize participation in the program, must display the current year. Only a current-year decal indicates active participation in the Whale SENSE program. Recognition for all Whale SENSE participants automatically expires at the end of each calendar year.
- 2) Companies renewing their participation must complete the annual renewal form provided by Whale SENSE coordinators at least one month before the start of the company's whale watching season.

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<sup>8</sup> *If the request is made within one month of the initial evaluation, only areas in which the criteria are not being followed will be re-evaluated. If the request is made more than one month after the initial evaluation, a full evaluation will be conducted.*



The company point of contact must provide updated information in the annual renewal form to indicate the company's commitment to meeting the program criteria.

- 3) Companies agree to make sure all advertisements meet Whale SENSE advertising criteria at the time the renewal form is submitted.
- 4) Companies agree to make arrangements to ensure that staff complete the annual training as it becomes available. This annual training for essential staff (captains and naturalists) must be **completed no later than one month after the start of the company's whale watching season**. To be considered complete, staff will be required to receive passing scores on a training assessment distributed by WDC, which will be used to measure the training effectiveness. This assessment will be completed online via the Whale SENSE website (owned and managed by WDC). Training completion requirements are as follows:
  - (1) WDC will send company POCs weekly updates on crew training completion from the start of the company's season until one month after the starting date.
  - (2) While all essential crew (captains and naturalists) are requested to complete the training, the minimum completion rate that constitutes a company meeting this requirement is 80% of each respective crew list.
  - (3) If a company does not meet the 80% minimum threshold for captain and naturalist completion respectively within one month of the season starting date, Whale SENSE coordinators will automatically grant the company a one-week grace period and will notify the company of such.
  - (4) If a renewing company still does not meet the 80% minimum threshold for captain and naturalist completion respectively after the one-week grace period, the company will be removed from the participant list on the Whale SENSE website until the 80% threshold is met.
  - (5) Should a company be removed, even temporarily, from the Whale SENSE website for not meeting the training completion requirements, and they wish to participate in the program for the subsequent season, all essential crew (captains and naturalists) will be required to achieve 100% completion of the training before being listed as a participating company in that subsequent season.



- 5) New decals will be distributed to participants only after the company completes the requirements outlined above in steps 1-4 of this section (Section V Paragraph B)

### **C. Whale SENSE recognition**

- 1) Upon successful completion of training, the company will be included on the list of program participants and featured in program promotions, including but not limited to the Whale SENSE website and social media platforms. Additionally, the company will receive all program materials and decals with the Whale SENSE logo to display on its vessels, ticket booths, and/or advertisements.

## **IV. Program Evaluation**

### **A. Purpose of annual evaluation**

- 1) Evaluation of participants annually is essential to gauge the program's effectiveness and success. This success relies on participants continuing to follow the program criteria after their initial evaluation and after receiving recognition as a Whale SENSE participant.
  - a) **The goal of the annual evaluation is to ensure that companies comply with the Whale SENSE criteria and encourage constructive dialogue, not to eliminate participants from the program.** Therefore, the focus of the annual evaluation process is to provide participants with constructive feedback related to meeting the Whale SENSE criteria. Whale SENSE partners will ensure all Whale SENSE participating companies conducting regular whale watching trips, regardless of how many vessels and captains are associated with their business, will be evaluated at least once each year either using in-person observation, third party evaluation, passenger comments, or a combination of these measures (depending on input from each individual company and program funding availability.)



## **B. On-the-water evaluation process**

- 1) In-person observations will be conducted randomly through unannounced visits. The annual evaluation will typically take place between **June & August** (alternative deadlines will be determined at the discretion of the Whale SENSE partners for companies with whale watching seasons outside of April-October.)
- 2) The evaluator will book, pay for, and attend a regularly scheduled departure.
  - a. Government funds, grant funding, or funds from a non-profit partner organization will cover the cost of trips taken by Whale SENSE evaluators to evaluate program participants.
- 3) The evaluator will evaluate the voyage for adherence to the Whale SENSE program criteria using a standard, predetermined [reporting form](#).
- 4) At the conclusion of the trip, the evaluator will review the reporting form, noting any areas of concern, and submit their completed form to Whale SENSE coordinators.

## **C. Other mechanisms for evaluating**

- 1) When unannounced trip evaluations are not possible, a combination of other mechanisms may be used as evaluation tools. Mechanisms may include, but are not limited to:
  - a) Announced trip with program evaluators for captains to demonstrate their knowledge and skills of maneuvering responsibly around whales, if program budget allows;
  - b) Random passenger surveys or comment cards (created, administered, and collected by WDC);
  - c) Online passenger reviews or videos from websites including but not limited to Yelp, YouTube, and TripAdvisor

## **D. Evaluation components**

- 1) Posted materials
  - a) Whale SENSE participants are required to have a current year placard and whale watch guidelines posted onboard the vessel.
- 2) Operational Compliance with Whale Watch Guidelines
  - a) Program participants are expected to adhere to NOAA's Greater Atlantic Whale Watching Guidelines to the best of their ability, as well as required North Atlantic right whale speed



and approach regulations. Partners acknowledge that many of the guidelines are not easily observable by an evaluator on deck. Therefore, evaluation criteria will only include operational guidelines that are easily observable from deck.

### 3) Naturalist Narration

- a) Evaluators will ensure that the educational messaging requirements outlined in Section III Paragraph A are shared with passengers, acknowledging that the delivery and style of the content will vary by naturalist and/or company

## D. Timeline for evaluation results

- 1) The evaluator will make every effort to provide the completed evaluation form to the program partners within 48 hours of the completed trip. Once the program partners are informed that an evaluation has been completed, companies will be notified of compliant evaluations within 4 weeks of the evaluation. Deviations from program criteria will be addressed as described in the following section.

## E. Program deviations

- 1) If any program deviations are documented, Whale SENSE coordinators will notify the participant within 5 business days of receiving the completed evaluation from the evaluator (48 hours upon completion of the evaluation). If an evaluator observes what he/she determines to be a federal violation he/she may contact the appropriate agency to report the incident.
- 2) The participant will have 14 days from the date of the notification to revise their practices.
- 3) Participant re-evaluation will occur after the 14-day timeframe mentioned above through an unannounced spot check, second volunteer evaluation, meeting with Whale SENSE partner, or pre-arranged ride-along by a program partner, volunteer, or third party.
- 4) If the company fails to revise their practices after being given **no more than three opportunities** during the season to meet the Whale SENSE standards, the company agrees to remove the Whale SENSE logo from its vessel(s) and advertisements, and the company name will be removed from the Whale SENSE website and future seasonal program promotions. The participant will be ineligible to participate in the Whale SENSE program for one year and may request re-evaluation and renewed



participation after one full year of non-participation.

- 5) If the deviation is not related to a federal law violation (i.e. vessel strike, 500 yard right whale rule or speed reduction rule), and the evaluated captain disagrees with the evaluator’s findings, they may submit a written response to one of the Whale SENSE coordinators. If the Whale SENSE partners are unable to come to an adequate resolution as to whether or not the potential deviation represents a program violation, the Whale SENSE partners will convene the Operation Evaluation Panel detailed below for a more detailed review.

## **F. Discrepancies from third-party and passenger feedback evaluation process**

- 1) If Whale SENSE partners receive reports of program discrepancies from third-party evaluators or passengers, partners will follow the “Complaints Procedure” outlined in Section V of this Framework. If complaints are not received in writing, or if no substantive evidence is provided with the complaint (video and/or photo) to prove a program violation occurred, the coordinators will follow up with the company with a courtesy phone call describing the complaint; however, no additional action will be taken. Companies are encouraged to address any complaints with their staff at their earliest convenience.

## **G. Providing feedback**

- 1) Participants are welcomed and encouraged to voluntarily provide feedback on the evaluation process to the Whale SENSE partners at any time during the year.

## **V. Complaints Procedure<sup>9</sup>**

*The following procedure establishes a process to address public complaints received by program coordinators regarding Whale SENSE participants not meeting the program criteria.*

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<sup>9</sup> *If any complaint is investigated by NOAA Office of Law Enforcement as a take under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, Endangered Species Act, or National Marine Sanctuary Act results in a judgment against the participant, the participant will be dropped from the Program. Future reinstatement will be at the discretion of the SENSE program partners.*



## **A. Telephone complaints**

- 1) A record of the conversation will be made and the complainant asked to put their concerns in writing.
- 2) The complainant will be advised that a redacted copy will be provided to the participant against whom the complaint was made.
- 3) No further action will be taken unless a written complaint is received by NOAA or WDC.
- 4) If a written complaint is received, the Complaints Procedure (detailed in the next Section below) will then be applied.

## **B. Complaints procedure\***

- 1) Written complaints will be date stamped and shared with the Whale SENSE coordinators.
- 2) The program coordinators will collectively assess whether the complaint is from a reliable source and if the complaint relates to the program's criteria. If the complaint does not relate to the program criteria, no further action will be taken.
- 3) If the complaint does relate to the Whale SENSE program criteria, Whale SENSE coordinators will forward a redacted copy of the complaint to the participant involved, outlining the main points of the complaint. The complainant's personally identifiable information (i.e., name, address, email, etc.) will be internal use only and will not be made public or available to the company in question.
- 4) The Whale SENSE coordinators will take one of the following actions:
  - i) Request a response from the participating company (i.e., was there a specific reason recorded in the vessel's logbook, or does the captain/naturalist recall the circumstances of the program deviation?). Responses should be returned to the Whale SENSE coordinators, in writing, within 5 business days of receiving the complaint copy, unless granted an extension.
  - ii) Arrange for an onboard evaluation by a trained evaluator according to the process outlined in Section IV Paragraph B of this Framework. Program coordinators will notify the company if they are taking this action, however the date of the evaluation will not be shared.
  - iii) Follow up with a courtesy call to the company point of contact to discuss any other steps that may be taken to resolve the complaint (i.e., request that the crew member(s) in question review the training again to make sure they remain compliant with NOAA's Greater Atlantic Whale



Watching Guidelines).

- 5) If the Whale SENSE coordinators determine the participant has deviated from the program criteria, the participant will be given 14 days to address areas of concern. The participant will then be re-evaluated utilizing options outlined in Section IV of this Framework. The program coordinators will select the most appropriate evaluation method.
- 6) If a second written complaint is received by the Whale SENSE coordinators within one year, the participant will undergo an additional evaluation in accordance with the procedures described in Section IV of this Framework.
- 7) If three valid complaints are received and upheld within one year, the participant will be ineligible to participate in the Whale SENSE program for one year. The participant will be removed from Whale SENSE program materials, and will not receive annual renewal decals. The company agrees to return current year decals and remove references to the Whale SENSE program from their websites and advertisements.
- 8) The participant may request re-evaluation and renewed participation after one full year of non-participation.

## **VI. Program Framework Review**

### **A. Annual review**

- 1) An annual review of the Whale SENSE participation criteria and program framework will ensure the program is functioning as intended and provides the opportunity to address issues that were not foreseen when the criteria were initially developed.
- 2) Whale SENSE partners will present proposed program framework updates during the end of year company call(s), and share updated program frameworks with companies when distributing the annual renewal form.



## VII. Educational Component

### A. Education/outreach materials

- 1) Well-crafted outreach and educational materials provided to the general public may encourage support of ocean stewardship in the Greater Atlantic region. As feasible, Whale SENSE partners will develop outreach and education materials to meet Whale SENSE participants' stated outreach needs.

### B. Continuing education

- 1) Whale SENSE partners may conduct additional educational workshops, upon request by the program participants, on relevant topics of interest such as local research.
- 2) Naturalists may request to join the "Whale SENSE Naturalists" Group on Facebook. This group serves as a way to facilitate communications among naturalists (in both Whale SENSE regions - the Greater Atlantic and Alaska), promote professional development opportunities, and update naturalists of entangled whale sightings and field research activities.
- 3) Whale SENSE partners will maintain and update online naturalist resources available through [www.whalesense.org](http://www.whalesense.org).

## VIII. Whale SENSE Program Public Awareness

- A. All program partners and participants will engage in activities intended to raise public awareness of this program and the importance of responsibly viewing whales.
- B. These activities may include (but are not limited to):
  - 1) Whale SENSE program partners will post information on their websites about the Whale SENSE program, including a [list of current participants](#).
  - 2) Whale SENSE program partners will conduct outreach about the Whale SENSE program in various publications and presentations.
  - 3) Whale SENSE program partners will work with other organizations to promote the importance of the Whale SENSE program through their websites and applicable publications.



- 4) Whale SENSE program partners may recognize the Whale SENSE program participants through press releases acknowledging the companies' successful completion of the program's training and their agreement to follow the voluntary program criteria.
- 5) Whale SENSE program participants may use the Whale SENSE logo in advertisements that meet the Whale SENSE advertising criteria as outlined earlier in the document, and must remove the logo if they no longer participate in the program.

**For any questions regarding the content of the Whale SENSE Program Framework, please [contact one of the program coordinators](#).**