Chasing orcas at 11.5 knots

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Chasing whales for commercial harvest had long lost the romantic allure of “thar she blows” by 1907, when the famed Moran Shipbuilding Company of Seattle launched the first American-built steam-powered whale chaser. With a top speed of 13 knots, Tyee Junior simply wore down the whales it chased. For a while, dozens of similar chaser boats each killed hundreds of whales. We know how that story ended.

As the initial sighting, we were in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, not far from rocky Smith Island. The orcas were swimming south down the coast of Whidbey Island, and they were magnificent. For a while the two big males were perfectly synchronized in their breathing and diving. It was a mesmerizing ballet, graceful and powerful. We inched closer so everyone on the vessel’s starboard side had a good view.

Our boat’s powerful diesel engines easily paced the five orcas. They picked up speed. Soon, they were “cooking,” gushed the guide. “I’ve never seen orcas swimming at 11 and a half knots!” The orcas slowed up nearing shallow water. “They must be tired,” suggested the guide. “I’ve never seen orcas swimming at 11 and a half knots!” We repeatedly closed to within 100 yards of the fast-swimming orcas, at over 11 knots boat speed, and we were much closer to the two sea lions. In accordance with federal law, the state of Washington requires all boats to maintain ample distances. Boats may approach orcas no closer than 200 yards. Within 400 yards, boat speed cannot exceed 7 knots. Clearly our vessel was not following these rules.

The financial incentives in the whale-watching industry are at odds with federal and state laws. Each chaser boat benefits from “gaines,” and the post-trip gratuities pocketed by the crew further reward illegal behavior. The best-practices “guidelines” issued by the Pacific Whale Watch Association, with its 32 member companies (seven in Friday Harbor alone) and around 100 vessels, are falling far short. It’s hard to imagine that law enforcement could ever cover the Salish Sea’s nearly 7,000 square miles. Gov. Jay Inslee might ask the whale-watching industry to develop technology as a means of self-policing.

It is feasible to track warm-blooded orcas that regularly breathe on the surface and send out plumes and splashes visible with satellites. A Google search for “tracking whales satellite images” is eye-opening. Each whale chaser already tracks itself through AIS. The maps of boats and whales could be correlated, and the companies and vessels that maintain proper distances could earn the privilege of continuing to operate.

If the whale-watching industry continues to engage in illegal activities, it should be shut down. We don’t yet know how this story will end.

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