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Orca network’s whale sighting network: citizen science and so much more

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Introduction
Volunteer citizen monitoring has increased over the past two decades due to public interest in the ecosystem and a desire to be part of the solution. Scientists and agencies are more receptive to using data collected by citizen volunteers, and new ways of collecting and sharing data (digital media, email, internet) have facilitated this cooperative effort.

The use of citizen volunteers increases information collected for researchers and agencies, provides important data at little or no cost, and provides citizen volunteers a hands-on learning experience and opportunities to take action and become more involved in advocacy and working toward solutions.

History and Purpose
Orca Network’s Whale Sighting Network began informally in the late 1990s, via phone calls to a short list of volunteers when whales were sighted from Whidbey Island. With the advent of email, a list-serv was started, and in 2008 Orca Network began a Facebook page to share whale sightings and news.

The Whale Sighting Network has now grown from a small handful of volunteers and researchers to over 14,000 Whale Report subscribers and 142,000 Facebook followers from the Pacific Northwest and around the world.

Whale sightings are collected through a toll free number (866-ORCANET), email, website/phone app, and Facebook; and shared via our website, email list, Facebook and Twitter.

What Happened
Inspired and motivated citizens, actively participating in providing data for researchers and advocating for solutions such as salmon recovery, reducing toxic pollution and preserving habitat for whales and their prey

Increased data on habitat and prey use, travel patterns, and social/behavioral observations about whales and other cetaceans, documentation of new/unusual species

Expansion of Sighting Network to cover Pacific Coast, in collaboration with the Center for Whale Research and other orca researchers up and down the coast

Increased awareness of the presence of whales in our urban waterways, and the need for healthy, undisturbed habitats

Improved communication/collaboration between researchers/agencies and the public

Increased education for boaters, promotion of “Be Whale Wise” boating and new regulations, and motivation to respect whales while boating in their home

Increased shore-based whale watching in the Salish Sea, reports from WA State Ferries

Increased Orca Network’s educational programs and projects, volunteer trainings, and the birth of the Langley Whale Center on Whidbey Island

Trends in species and habitat use of the Salish Sea

Unexpected Side Effects

- Assisting researchers with tracking whales in trouble: entanglements, ill/injured, lone calves, species out of usual habitat
- Data has shown changes in species/habitat use over time: increase in Humpbacks and Transient orcas in the Salish Sea and Puget Sound
- Data used by industry consultants for projects such as pile driving, seismic testing, gravel pit expansion, tidal turbines
- Volunteers on shore observe boater behavior while they are watching whales, and report improper boating behavior to NOAA fisheries as well as on social media, creating peer pressure to boat safely and respectfully around whales
- Educate and inform agencies, elected officials, media, Navy/Coast Guard about the presence of whales in Salish Sea
- City of Langley partnered with Orca Network to install a Whale Bell, named their City Park
- Through discussions with City of Langley and Dept. of Natural Resources, we were able to change ghost shrimp harvesting practices in N. Puget Sound gray whale habitat, and help get funding for Cascadia Research to study this small population of grays
- Improve economy through increase in tourism, and people visiting and moving to the Pacific Northwest to be closer to the whales
- Partnering with WA State Ferries and OrcaSound on an App and digital mapping for Sightings; installing hydrophones on Whidbey Island
- Orca Network now has five paid staff for our Whale Sighting Network, Langley Whale Center and Education programs
- Creating a community of whale lovers, who become devout advocates for the whales of the Salish Sea, their habitat, and their prey