

## Chasing orcas at 11.5 knots



Source: Eagle Wing Tours <https://www.eaglewingtours.com/whale-watching-affect-whales/>

By Thomas J. Misa / Sept. 9, 2018

Chasing whales for commercial harvest had long lost the romantic allure of “thar she blows” and “Nantucket sleighrides” by 1907, when the famed Moran Shipbuilding Company of Seattle launched the first American-built steam-powered whale chaser. *Tyee Junior* was 98 feet long and for years the fastest whale chaser on the Pacific coast. With a top speed of 13 knots, the steamer simply wore down the whales it went after, and then its explosive harpoons killed them. For a while, dozens of similar chaser boats each brought in hundreds of whales to shore stations up and down the Washington and British Columbia coastline. The slaughter diminished the stocks. We know how that story ended: the prized humpback, finback, blue, and sperm whales were exterminated and by the 1960s only sei whales remained in these Pacific waters.<sup>1</sup>

Chasing whales for recreational harvest today employs diesel-powered boats, and their 20-plus knot speeds, radio networks, and sophisticated electronics again tilt the tables. On September 7th during a Salish Sea whale watch voyage, I experienced some of the best—and some of the worst—of the whale-watching industry. We were on a calm passage when a passenger shouted “there they are, spouts at 3 o’clock.” Someone else blurted out, “yes, right there at 3:30.” The pilot and guide hadn’t seen the action but they swung the boat over and we chased five orcas for the next hour. It was thrilling and it was horrible.

We’ve all seen the dramatic photos but truly it is an emotional and moving experience to experience the real thing and up close. At 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

---

<sup>1</sup> The entire sad story is told in Robert Lloyd Webb’s *On the Northwest: Commercial Whaling in the Pacific Northwest, 1790-1967* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).

Whidbey Island, and they were magnificent. For perhaps 10 minutes the two big males were perfectly synchronized in their breathing and diving, and for another 5 minutes they were joined by a smaller immature orca in a mesmerizing ballet that was graceful and powerful. We inched closer so everyone on the starboard side of the vessel got incredible views of the immense spar fins and muscular backs.

Our boat's powerful diesel engines easily paced the five orcas. They picked up speed and even started porpoising with higher and shallower dives. Soon they were "cooking," according to the enthusiastic guide. "I've never seen orcas swimming at 11 and a half knots," he gushed, "this is incredible!" The orcas slowed up nearing shallow water. "They must be tired," suggested the guide, "I know I'd be tired by that." Finally, beyond Point Partridge and a mile south of buoy 5, we peeled off—we'd followed them 8.5 (statute) miles according to my GPS track—and by then word was out and another of the commercial whale-chasers was closing in. Continuing along we stopped close enough to buoy 1, near Smith Island, to chase off two mammoth male Steller sea lions that were resting on the buoy's platform, impossibly high out of the water. The guide directed us to think they were practicing the rituals for collecting and managing females during mating season. But this was early September and mating is typically in May.

We repeatedly closed to within 100 yards and less of the fast-swimming orcas, at over 11 knots boat speed, and we were much closer to the two sea lions. In accordance with the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the state of Washington requires all boats to maintain ample distances. Boats may approach orcas no closer than 200 yards, or around two football fields. Further, within 400 yards of orcas the maximum allowed boat speed is just 7 knots.<sup>2</sup> Clearly our vessel was not following the rules—the entirety documented in 20-second GPS increments (see below). Later that day in Friday Harbor a happy man, just off from one of the long *Zodiac*-style whale chasers whose passengers wear snazzy red life jackets, told me that they had been as close as 10 yards.

The financial incentives in the whale-watching industry are at odds with federal and state laws. Each chaser boat benefits from getting a reputation for "going close," 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.<sup>3</sup> The Salish Sea is nearly 7,000 square miles in area, and it's hard to imagine that enough federal, state, and provincial law enforcement agents could ever cover this terrain. San Juan islanders are petitioning the federal

---

<sup>2</sup> Official Boating Handbook of the Washington State Parks, page 64 of 69 at <https://www.boat-ed.com/washington/handbook/page/64/Orca-Whales/>

<sup>3</sup> Jim Donaldson, "They watch whales for a living and now plan to change the rules," *Bellingham Herald* (19 April 2018) at <https://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/local/article209276414.html> ; Simone Del Rosario, Brett Cihon and Q13 News Staff, "Whale watching boats still disturbing endangered killer whales despite efforts," (September 20, 2018) at [q13fox.com/2018/09/20/whale-watching-boats-still-disturbing-endangered-killer-whales-despite-efforts/](http://q13fox.com/2018/09/20/whale-watching-boats-still-disturbing-endangered-killer-whales-despite-efforts/) ; and <https://www.pacificwhalewatchassociation.com/guidelines/>

government to create a sizable “whale protection zone” in Haro Strait.<sup>4</sup> Governor Jay Inslee in his efforts to bring state law in line with Canada’s might ask the whale-watching industry to develop technology as a means of self-policing.

Satellite imagery is tracking cold-blooded fish, and it is feasible to track warm-blooded orcas that regularly breathe on the surface and send out plumes and splashes much larger than satellites’ sharp resolution. Whales off Maui and elsewhere are clearly visible on Google Earth.<sup>5</sup> Whales and nearby whale-watching boats are at measurable distances in other images.<sup>6</sup> A search for “tracking whales satellite images” on YouTube is rewarding and fun. Each whale-watching vessel 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 while the violators could be appropriately fined. Already the Global Fishing Watch mobilizes AIS to monitor potential poachers where law enforcement is thin.<sup>7</sup>

If the whale-watching industry cannot regulate itself, and it continues to engage in manifestly illegal activities, it seems overdue for a shut down. We don’t yet know how this story will end.

Thomas J. Misa  
Lopez Island WA  
[tmisa@umn.edu](mailto:tmisa@umn.edu)

Thomas J. Misa, a native of Port Angeles, recently moved to Lopez Island. He is professor of history (emeritus) at the University of Minnesota. His website is [tjmisa.com](http://tjmisa.com).

---

<sup>4</sup> See “Lawsuit: ‘Whale Protection Zone’ would limit vessel noise, disturbance near San Juan Island,” (1 August 2018) at <https://sanjuanislander.com/news-articles/environment-science-whales/whales-2/27740/lawsuit-whale-protection-zone-would-limit-vessel-noise-disturbance-near-san-juan-island>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gearthblog.com/blog/archives/2017/03/whales-google-earth.html>

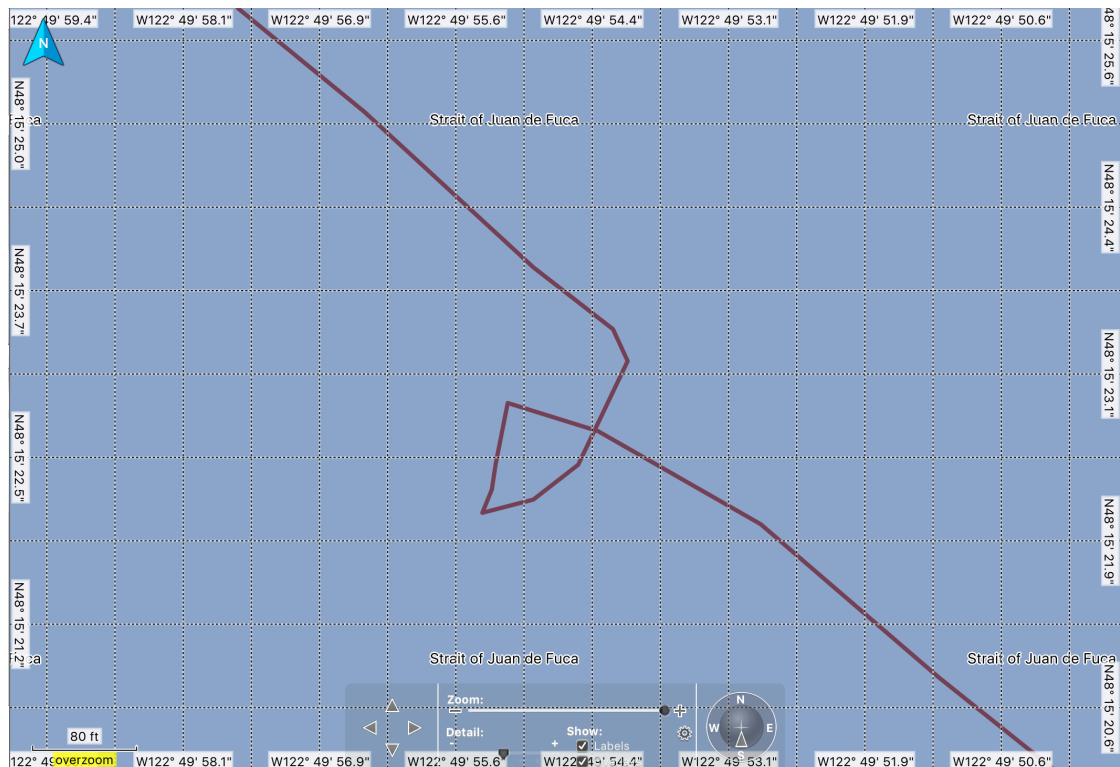
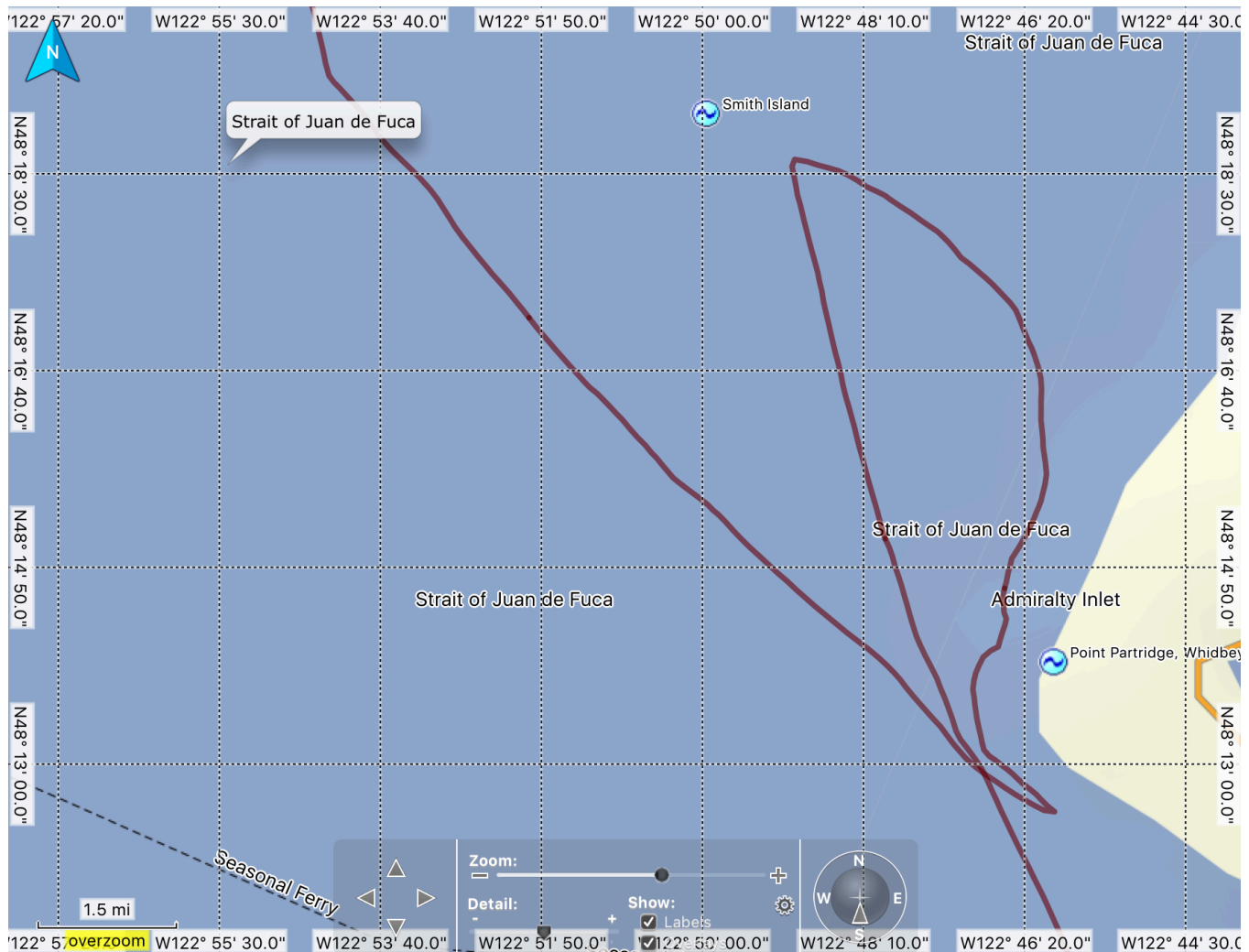
<sup>6</sup> <http://blog.digitalglobe.com/industry/counting-whales-by-satellite/>

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Pala, “Tracking Fishy Behavior, From Space,” *Atlantic Monthly* (November 16, 2014) at <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/11/tracking-fishy-behavior-from-space/382797/>

## Chasing Orcas at 11.5 knots

Top GPS track: chasing 5 orcas from near Smith Island to south of Point Partridge

Bottom GPS track: disturbing Steller sea lions from Smith Island Buoy 1 (note scales lower left)



7 September 2018