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Behavioral Responses of Right Whales to Whale Watching Activities in the Southern Brazilian Coast and an Evaluation of its Conservation Implications

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Regular boat-based whale watching in southern Brazilian coast started just in 1999, with a single authorized boat operating in agreement to the national legislation. To assess the potential impact of this activity to the whales off the coast of Santa Catarina State (28°S - 48°W), Southern Brazil. from July to November 2000, it was studied habitat use and behavior of right whales in relation to whale watching activities along this region. Whales occurred in all months with peaks of sightings in August (38%, n=57) and September (44%, n=66). Mother-calf pairs were observed in 60% (n=90) of all groups sighted, the reminder (40%, n=60) were of groups without calves. From the total number of whale watching cruises carried in the region (n=44), 34% (n=15) were monitored and 19% (n=25) of the encounters with whales were accompanied. The duration of the whale-boat encounters varied from 10 to 55 minutes. All boat approaches (100%) were "stationary approaches". From the total of groups approached, 87.9% (n=29) were mother-calf pairs and 12.1% (n=4) were groups of adults without calves. Whales' reactions in mother-calf pairs were "uninterested" during 57.1% (n=12) of the encounters, "positive" in 33.3% (n=7) and "negative" in 9.5% (n=2). During 50% (n=2) of the encounters with groups of adults without calves, whales' reaction was "uninterested", in 25% (n=1) were "positive" and 25% (n=1) were "negative". These data suggest that most right whales' groups are approachable by the whale watching boat monitored. The monitoring of the whale watching activity since its first years of development is an important issue for the conservation and management of this right whale population and for the adequate development of whale watching in Santa Catarina State.