

# Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary

## Reducing Ship Strikes on Blue Whales



A container ship narrowly misses a blue whale. Photo: Julie Helmers

In fall 2007, the death of four blue whales in the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary region, with three confirmed and one likely caused by ship strikes, created an emergency situation that the sanctuary responded to with full force. With the 2008 summer blue whale season looming, community members, elected officials, partner agencies, NGOs and the sanctuary advisory council are looking to the sanctuary for responsive action and leadership. The whale deaths and resulting public outcry drew local, national, and international media attention.

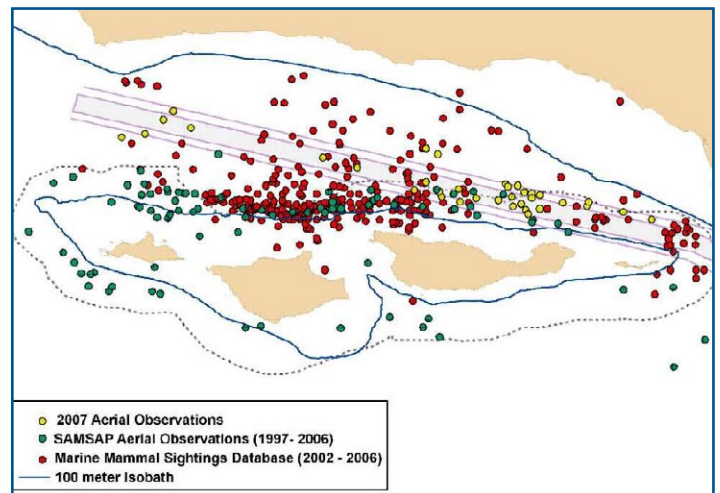
### Community and Agency Collaboration

The sanctuary advisory council has endorsed a multi-agency and community-based process to develop a set of short and long term recommendations to detect when there is an elevated collision risk; lower risks through ship speed reductions and providing timely whale location information to the shipping industry; improve response coordination; gain a deeper scientific understanding of factors contributing to ship strikes, including whale health, acoustic environment and prey distribution changes; and institute a monitoring program to evaluate the status of blue whales and their habitat usage patterns.

By May 2008, a sanctuary advisory council subcommittee — including U.S. Coast Guard, NOAA Fisheries, shipping industry, conservation, U.S. Navy, UC Santa Barbara and National Park Service representatives — will recommend to the council and the sanctuary superintendent a detailed response plan to be implemented by NOAA, the Coast Guard and the shipping industry upon the anticipated return of the blue whales in summer 2008.

### Monitoring

We propose a comprehensive monitoring plan to support the management of blue whales in and around the sanctuary. Given the current sanctuary research budget, support and financial assistance from other agencies and industry partners will likely be necessary.



This map shows whale sighting data collected in and around Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. Credit: NOAA



### **Modified Ongoing Activities:**

- Continue sanctuary overflights to document whale distributions.
- Maintain and update the sanctuary's marine mammal observation database.
- Continue to monitor broadband acoustics in the sanctuary.
- Continue to monitor ship activity within the sanctuary and surrounding waters using the shipping industry's Automated Identification System.
- Continue to coordinate with ongoing research on blue whale movement.

### **New Activities:**

- Deploy the sanctuary research vessel Shearwater to assess marine mammal and sea bird abundance.
- Monitor krill distributions with acoustics already aboard the R/V Shearwater.
- Sample water quality indexes of primary productivity and nutrients to interpret krill distribution patterns.
- Coordinate with research programs at UC Santa Barbara and the Scripps Institute of Oceanography.
- Apply lessons learned from Stellwagen and Hawaiian Islands sanctuaries' ship strike reduction programs.

### **Potential Longer-Term Strategies to Reduce Ship Strikes**

Research and pilot efforts are needed to determine the relative effectiveness of:

- Adjusting ship speeds, taking into account temporal, seasonal and geographic conditions.
- Placing observers on board ships when large whales are in the Santa Barbara Channel.
- Adjusting shipping lanes seasonally or permanently.
- Issuing Notice to Mariners and NOAA weather service announcements when blue whales are in the shipping lanes and tracking shipping industry compliance with reduced ship speed recommendations.