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## **Operational Guidelines for Approaching Marine Mammals (Excerpt from Lindblad Field Staff Handbook)**

### **OBSERVATION OF WHALES AND DOLPHINS:**

The opportunity to observe and interact with whales and dolphins in their native habitats is often one of the highlights of a LEX-NG voyage. In fact, there is perhaps nothing more effective in inspiring environmental awareness or enlightening a guest's world views than intimately experiencing the peaceful and trusting – and often playful – nature of these social and communicative marine mammals.

An extraordinary element of a LEX-NG trip is the fact that we allow the flexibility in time and destinations to patiently and peacefully observe a whale's behavior, and allows an animal the time to become comfortable with our presence. By taking the time to develop a level of comfort with an individual or group of whales or dolphins, we are then in a better position to observe their behavior patterns and to determine their level of comfort with our presence.

Along with the privilege of observing whales and dolphins in their natural environments comes the paramount responsibility to avoid any disruption of their feeding, breathing, or reproductive patterns. This is sometimes referred to as "harassment," and is explicitly prohibited in the U.S. through the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). While the MMPA does not define regulatory specifics, such as minimum distances, there are also self-imposed ethical considerations to which we adhere in the interest of minimizing any disturbances to whales or dolphins in their natural habitats. LEX-NG whale watching guidelines are based largely on our own extensive experience and guidelines by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service's National Marine Mammal Laboratories.

### **Guidelines For Observation Of Whales From Lex-Ng Ships**

- Always be aware of any existing national, regional, or local regulations. LEX-NG will always provide this information to the ships, but it is the responsibility of both the EL and Captain to become aware of these, and to communicate any knowledge between themselves and the deck officers.
- When nearing the area where a whale has been spotted, proceed slowly, allowing time to determine the apparent behavior of the whales, as well as their general direction of travel and speed.
- When approaching a whale after getting an idea of its behavior, stop at least 100 yards from where the whale was last seen.
- Approach whales slowly from behind and to the side — NEVER from directly in front or behind the whales.
- Avoid sudden changes in engine speed and direction of the ship, and always proceed slowly.
- Position yourself 100 yards from the whale and move parallel to their direction of travel.
- Be alert for behavioral signs that may indicate that a whale is uncomfortable with our presence, such as sudden changes of direction or speed or erratic surfacing patterns. If you still find it difficult to get a good look at a whale after a few surfacings, chances are it is uninterested or bothered by our presence, and it is probably time to move on.
- When you are ready to leave the whales, move away slowly and without sudden changes in the ship's speed.
- Know when to leave a whale! Any of the above behavioral indicators of a whale's discomfort or disinterest should be taken as an indicator to slowly leave the area. The EL or a designated naturalist should explain the situation to the guests.
- After a particularly good observation of a whale, there may be no need to continue in the vicinity of the same animals. It is always better to peacefully depart after an inspiring encounter than to wait until an animal shows any signs of being disturbed.
- It is also important to be aware of guest "saturation" with a group of whales or dolphins. Be aware of the percentage of guests who remain interested in continued observation of the whales or dolphins.
- Very often, after spending some time calmly observing a whale, the whale will become obviously comfortable with the ship's presence, and surface or move in very close to the ship – often closer than 100 yards. This happens more often



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than one may tend to expect, and is NOT a violation of regulations. In this case, however, keep the ship in neutral or drifting, maneuvering as necessary for the safety of the vessel, and allow the whale to move about and explore freely. When the whale has moved away, proceed slowly away from the area, without sudden change of speed and direction.

NOTE: While we all do our best to approach and experience whales as sensitively and unobtrusively as possible, whales are sometimes unpredictable, and may surface in unexpected areas or react in unexpected ways. If a staff member or EL has a concern about an encounter with a whale, it is imperative that they discuss this first with the EL and Captain, and not begin by presenting their perceptions to the guests.

#### Guidelines For Observation Of Dolphins/Porpoises

- When approaching a school of dolphins or porpoises, use the same approach as for whales, approaching slowly from behind and to the side, and moving parallel to their direction of travel.
- Do not approach closer than 50 yards. Most often the case is that some individuals in a school of dolphins or porpoises will come over to explore the ship or ride the bow wake, which is not a violation of any existing or proposed regulations.
- If bypassing a group of dolphins or porpoises at high speed, try to stay outside of the group. If, as is sometimes the case, the group is so large that one cannot avoid passing through, reduce speed and proceed slowly. NEVER move directly into a group of dolphins or porpoises at high speed.

#### INFORMATION REGARDING OTHER MARINE MAMMALS, SPECIFIC TO ARCTIC OPERATIONS:

##### Zodiac Cruises

The driver of the Zodiac must exercise vigilance particularly in ice filled water, often encountered along glacier fronts. These are areas hunted by polar bears, which have been seen to make underwater stalking approaches to kill bearded seals. Polar bears swimming with only their nose out of the water are virtually invisible and they can also remain under the water for five minutes at a time. Remain in open water around concentrations of ice, being particularly cautious when seals are hauled-out on floating ice. In these situations, do not stop your engine or remain stationary for any length of time, even if requested by avid photographers or videographers. Bears, other than those actually stalking a seal or “still” or stationary-hunting, will usually move away from a Zodiac. Do not chase bears and always remain at a reasonable distance from them (50 meters) if possible. Do not block their access to land or to the ice. If a bear has made a kill, approaching them by Zodiac when they are feeding on carcasses on ice can also be hazardous and to some degree constitutes harassment. Here, there is the danger of eliciting an attack by a bear protecting its food or of forcing the bear to abandon its hard earned dinner. Be aware that if you are near a bear feeding on a kill other bears could be in the immediate vicinity. Do not approach or pursue bears in the water. They feel vulnerable in such situations and are easily stressed. Bears, lying near the water’s edge or on low cliffs overlooking the water, should also be given a wide berth. These animals are probably hunting and approaching them can disrupt their potential feeding opportunities. In these cases moving slowly past in an organized manner, one Zodiac following the other, is the best approach. Appoint a lead Zodiac with a driver experienced in this type of encounter. If the bear shows any sign of leaving the shore, leave the area immediately. If a bear is seen by a cruise Zodiac, its location should be given to the other boats for safety’s sake and not so 10 Zodiacs can chase or surround it. Avoid the bear if it is in the water. If the bear shows signs of avoidance or concern on ice, such as yawning, huffing, or digging into the ice, retreat immediately. Remember: In floating ice the viewing of bears feeding on a kill is best done safely from the ship.

##### Kayak Deployment

Scouting of the area prior to putting kayaks in the water and anchoring the kayak platform is essential. There should always be a loaded set of weapons on the platform. Guests should be given clear instructions about staying well away from the shoreline. They should also be instructed to activate their EPIRBS and raise their paddles if they sight a polar bear. The kayak safety boat and two other Zodiacs (when feasible), all with rifles aboard, should be on constant patrol or near at hand. Should a bear be sighted all boats and the bridge are to be informed of its location. The closest Zodiac to



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the bear should then slowly move the bear away from the kayaks by following it at about 100 meters distance while the other Zodiacs round-up the kayaks and move them out of the area where the polar bear is swimming. Don't hesitate to use a report cartridge to deter it if it approaches from the land.

## APPROACHING WILDLIFE WHILE WALKING ON THE LAND

### Polar Bears

Polar bears should never be approached on foot. When sighted, personnel should retreat immediately.

### Walrus

Walrus (Aiviq) are found on traditional hauling-out sites (Ugli). They occupy these sites from late July to late August. During this period they are huddling together to increase their skin temperature in order to accelerate the molting process. The larger concentrations are composed of males only. Approaches on foot to such concentrations should not come directly from the water's edge. Land your guests at least 300 meters downwind from the uglit if you are coming to land in Zodiacs. Approach the haul-out from the downwind direction, using cover if it is available. Remain quiet, stay low and avoid using the flash feature on the cameras. If any of the animals in the huddle begin moving towards the water as you approach retreat immediately. Be aware that polar bears often remain close to walrus. Careful scouting of the area, prior to landing, and constant vigilance during the viewing by several armed staff members is recommended. If walrus begin moving towards the water, break off viewing stay low and retreat slowly.

## APPROACHING WILDLIFE FROM ZODIACS OR KAYAKS

### Polar Bears

See Zodiac Cruises and Kayak Deployment section above.

### Walrus

There are usually walrus in the water somewhere near their traditional haul-out sites. These provide some of the best and least intrusive viewing opportunities of this species. Approach swimming walrus very slowly and remain outside of their main concentrations. Here again a line of Zodiacs following a lead boat is an efficient way of proceeding. Allow the animals to approach you, stay low in the boats and avoid sudden movements. Keep the engine running and the boats moving very slowly while observing the nearby animals. The Zodiac driver should be prepared to dissuade an overly curious walrus from prodding the Zodiac by using a paddle to push it away firmly on the nose. Approaching a haul-out from the water in Zodiacs has a greater potential of disturbing them than walking to them from the land. In these cases, if the land approach was not feasible, the 100m standoff distance should be respected by the Zodiac drivers. Again an orderly slow moving single file of boats would be the best approach. Kayakers should be strongly dissuaded from approaching walrus suddenly seen in the water. Kayak operations should not be started anywhere near a walrus haulout site as there are usually satellite animals in the water.