

Voluntary – Cetacean and Pinniped Sightings Program (V-CaPS)

What is the V-CaPS Program?

The Voluntary – Cetacean and Pinniped Sightings Program (V-CaPS) is an IAATO initiative that asks field staff to report their marine mammal sightings to develop a documented record of where they are found on the Antarctic Peninsula.

Why did IAATO start the V-CaPS Program?

Crew and field staff of the IAATO fleet are aware of the locations of marine mammal species that live on or migrate to the Antarctic Peninsula (hereafter Peninsula). However, most of this knowledge is anecdotal, collected by personal observations or discussions with other staff and crew.

Many operators also participate in programs such as HappyWhale or provide opportunities for scientists to perform research on their vessels, which yield scientific information, but these data are not comprehensive and focus on particular species.

Similarly, there is documented research on where certain marine mammals can be found, such as the fur seal population at Cape Shirreff which is monitored by the US Antarctic Marine Living Resources Program, but this is not available for all species. To date, a singular, currently available dataset that considers the entire Peninsula during the Antarctic tourism season (October – April) across the marine mammal species is not available.

At the 2019 Annual Meeting, IAATO members voted on and agreed to two geofenced whale slow down areas on the Peninsula. However, IAATO also recognized the need to evaluate whether these sites were appropriate across space and time during the season.

IAATO is in a unique position to collect data on marine mammal sightings from October through April due to fleet activity around the Peninsula, so it is important to keep these records. These data could provide insight as to whether current geofenced areas are adequately protecting whales and what changes are occurring on the Peninsula with climate change. These data may also be shared with other scientific programs collecting wildlife data.

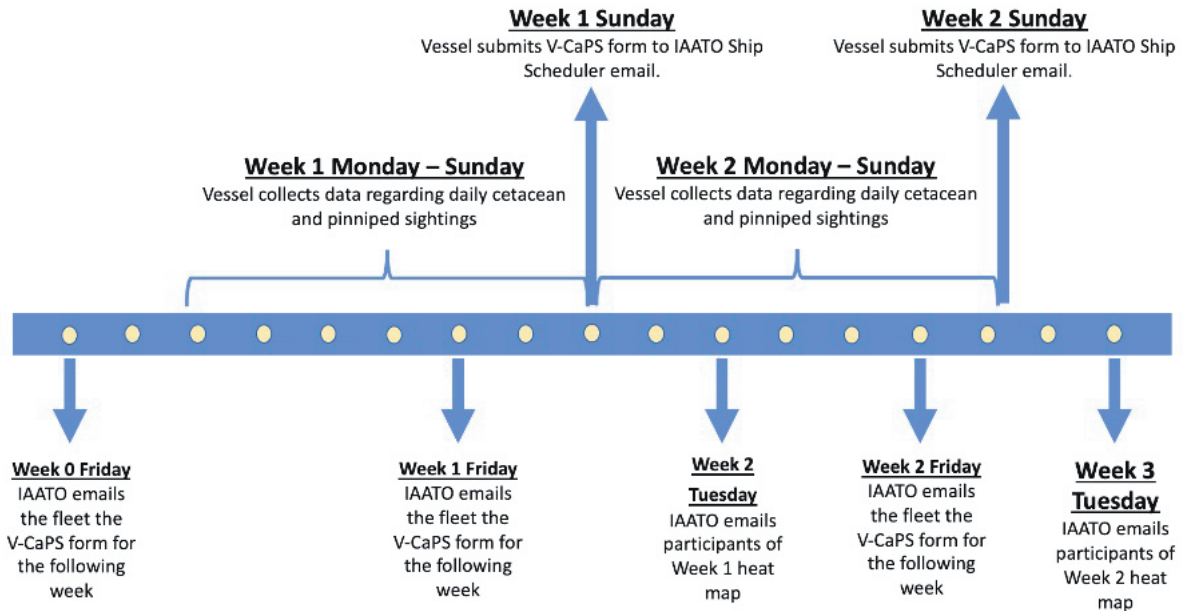
Therefore, the IAATO Secretariat supported a baseline collection of data on a voluntary basis for the 2022-23 season. Operators who regularly participated received weekly heat maps showing where marine mammals were spotted the previous week. The resulting findings led to the creation of two new slow down zones around the South Shetland Islands and the Elephant Island group at the 2023 Annual Meeting in Hamburg, Germany.

The IAATO Secretariat and the Marine and Field Operations Committees have considered how this program may further evolve and additional tools (i.e., apps, programs) which may be leveraged in the future. This work is ongoing in the 2024-2025 field season.



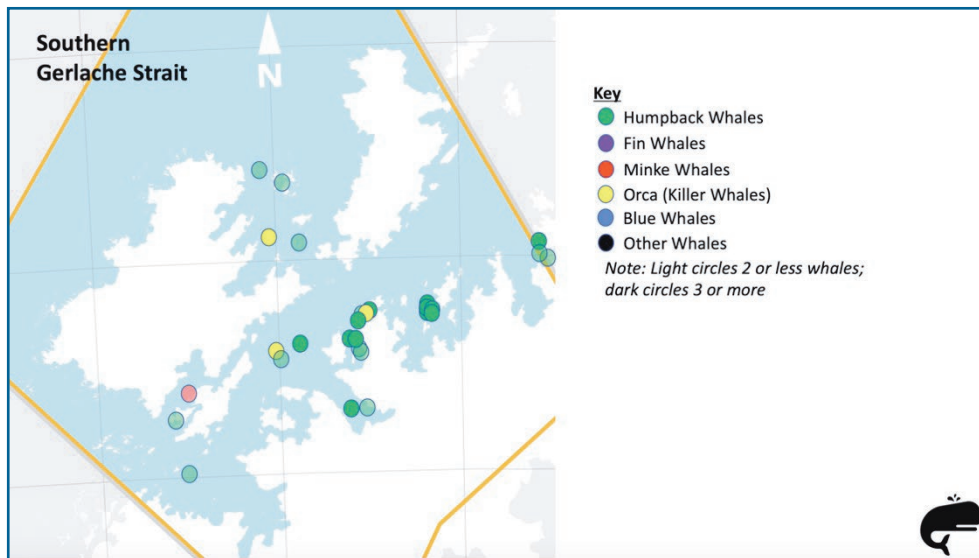
How can I participate in the V-CaPS Program?

- 1) During the season, an email notification will be sent on Fridays from the IAATO Ship Scheduler account (shipscheduler@IAATO.org) to each vessel and expedition leader with the details of the program and the form for the following week.
 - a. The first email for the 2024-25 season will be sent out on Friday, November 1 with a form to track sightings from Monday, November 4 to Sunday, November 10.
- 2) To receive the heat map created from that week's data, vessels must submit the form by Sunday. Heat maps will be distributed on Tuesdays based upon the prior week's data. An illustrative example of the weekly V-CaPS program timeline is provided below:



- a. For non-SOLAS vessels the form will be provided prior to the expedition, as their access to internet may be limited. They will need to submit their form within 24 hours of their expedition ending, per Ship Scheduler.
- 3) The expedition leader may designate a member of their expedition team (crew or staff) to provide the information to IAATO. Additionally, they may designate a visiting member of the scientific community to submit to IAATO; however, it is the expedition leader's responsibility to make sure that the submissions occur to receive the weekly heat map. The expedition leader will consult with the Operator's leadership as to their participation in this program.
- 4) Vessels will be asked to provide their weekly reports to the IAATO Ship Scheduler account.
 - a. The report is a simple Excel document, with a tab for each day of the week, which requests the following information:
 - i. Date
 - ii. Approximate time of seeing the mammals in UTC
 - iii. Vessel
 - iv. Observer Name
 - v. Platform (i.e., vessel vs. small boat)
 - vi. Location name (including site name, latitude, and longitude)
 - vii. Cetacean or pinniped
 - viii. Species
 - ix. Number of animals
 - x. Other notes, which may include information such as behaviour (including feeding, hunting, sleeping, or if there were any calves/pups in the group)

- 5) Every Monday, IAATO will review the data received and prepare a heat map from sightings from the previous week and share it the following day (Tuesday) with the vessels that participated during the previous week.
- a. Example of a heat map from January 29-February 4, 2024.



- 6) Participation in the program will be assessed, and any new proposals will be presented at the Annual Meeting in Cascais, Portugal in April 2025.

Note: The Secretariat will maintain an Excel spreadsheet that logs information received. As the data are collected by IAATO, maps and associated notes on sightings cannot be distributed outside of IAATO without consultation with the IAATO Secretariat first.

Contact Information

Please email your questions and concerns to IAATO Ship Scheduler (shipscheduler@iaato.org).