

IN BRIEF**Watching Whales...And Poop***by Cheryl Ambrozic-Mooz*[Normal View](#) [Print View](#) [Without Graphics](#) [Mail to a Friend](#)

From November to April, hundreds of thousands of tourists flock to whale-watching excursions in the Hawai`ian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. Few of these visitors realize that their boats are dumping sewage directly into the sanctuary.

The ocean surrounding Maui provides one of the world's most important habitats for critically endangered humpback whales. Nearly two-thirds of the entire North Pacific population migrates to Hawai`i each winter for breeding, calving and nursing.

In 1997, the 1,218 square nautical miles of coastal and ocean waters around the main Hawai`ian Islands became a National Marine Sanctuary to protect these cetaceans. The federal sanctuary is one of 13 operated by the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).



Hawai`i's Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) is responsible for small boat harbors, most of which never received onshore waste pump-out facilities. DLNR engineers project February 2009 as a completion date for a permanent arterial pump-out facility at Maui's busiest harbor, Ma`alaea. For now, tour boat operators are legally allowed to discharge waste three miles from shore, and as much as 1,000 gallons goes into the water every day.

The five islands of Maui County provide a sheltered, bay-like setting ideal for commercial whale watching excursions along Maui's south and west shores. This arrangement, combined with the wind, waves and ocean currents, brings the swirling plumes released from boats' holding tanks directly into near-shore waters.

Frustrated by the lack of action, a small group of Maui residents formed the group Pump Don't Dump (PDD) in 2004. Mike Moran, a PDD founder, wonders, "How can this be called a sanctuary when these majestic creatures are exposed to sewage and chemicals dumped upon them from these boats?" The group says a loophole in sanctuary rules allows dumping as long as boats use Coast Guard-approved marine toilets.

PDD began advocating for the interim solution of providing dockside pumping trucks at Ma`alaea. With the state unresponsive, Maui County Environmental Coordinator Rob Parsons acquired funding for the Ma`alaea Harbor Sewage Pump-out Program, which pays for onshore pumping twice a week. But as of last March only half of 25 local commercial boaters were participating.

Richard Rice, administrator for the state Department of Boating and Recreation, says the problem has been getting the state to prioritize funding. "Eventually, when the upgrades to the current wastewater system are in place, Ma`alaea harbor will have pump-out facilities," he says.

PDD's focus now is to convince NOAA to establish a No-Discharge Zone within the sanctuary. "So far," says PDD founder Richard Fairclo, "too many boaters won't stop dumping sewage. The federal whale sanctuary must pass and enforce rules against despoiling the fragile marine environment."

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