

Evidence essay · Wildlife and ecology

Distance is part of wildlife observation

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Fictional author and institute · Editorial demonstration, not peer reviewed

ABSTRACT

Wildlife observation is assessed through the choices that precede a photograph, not the closeness or apparent calm of its subject. Using NOAA marine-life viewing guidance, the essay explains why an absent visible response does not prove no disturbance and why a minimum distance is not a target. A hypothetical comparison contrasts distant viewing with repeated pursuit that could produce a similarly framed image. Duration, crowding, access routes, young animals, vessel sound, and current local requirements all affect the encounter. Public viewing remains distinct from permitted research, and sensitive locations may require restricted sharing. The piece provides no universal distance or safety protocol. Its practical implication is to document a respectful method, accept leaving without an image, and never treat a generated scene as evidence of compliant fieldwork.

Keywords: wildlife viewing · disturbance · observation distance · research permits · sensitive locations

Adapted from the Still North field journal. Original article. A source-based editorial text, not a report of original Still North research. Examples and imagery are illustrative.

A seal lifts its head as a group stops to watch. Someone says it is only curious; someone else wants one closer photograph. Neither interpretation gives the group permission to approach. The question is not whether people can obtain an image without an obvious escape response. It is whether the observation leaves the animal free to continue its own activity.

NOAA's marine-life viewing guidance warns that staring, fidgeting, or moving away can signal disturbance in seals and sea lions. It also says to maintain distance even when those reactions are absent. The absence of a visible response is not a measurement of no effect. This principle is useful beyond one encounter, although the legal requirements remain specific to species and place.

A minimum distance is not a target to reach

Viewing rules vary by jurisdiction, species, platform, and season. A number copied from another coast can be wrong for the animal in front of you. Before travel, obtain current requirements from the responsible authority and local operator, including closures and restrictions on aircraft or drones. This article is an explanation of observation choices, not a navigation or wildlife-safety protocol.

Even where a rule specifies a minimum, it does not promise that every approach just outside that line is harmless. Conditions may require more space, or no viewing at all. Poor visibility, young animals, a confined shore, and other visitors can all limit the available choices. If there is no way to observe within the applicable requirements and without disturbing the animals, the observation should not happen.

Compare two ways of getting the same photograph

Consider a hypothetical shore visit. In one version, people remain at an authorised distant viewing point and use

binoculars or a long lens. In another, they follow the animal as it moves away, repeatedly recovering the same apparent gap. Both could end with a similarly framed photograph. The second has turned movement away into a reason for continued pursuit.

The photograph alone cannot distinguish those histories. A responsible account records the observation method and does not present an animal filling the frame as evidence of an intimate, welcome encounter. Wider framing can retain habitat and separation. A caption can explain the use of a long lens without claiming an unmeasured exact distance.

NOAA's guidance also cautions against encircling animals, trapping them between vessels and shore, or adding another craft when one is already nearby. A route that looks acceptable from one boat may look quite different from the animal's position. A water access route, resting space, or separation between adults and young should not become a photographic composition problem.

Time and company change the encounter

Distance is only one dimension. A succession of short visits can leave an animal with prolonged exposure to people. A quiet individual can join a noisy group. A vessel can remain visually distant while producing underwater sound. There is no single distance measurement that describes all those pressures.

That does not mean visitors should improvise a new threshold from animal behaviour. It means following the relevant limits on duration, numbers, approach, and operations as well as distance. The plan should permit leaving without the hoped-for image. Our [wildlife and food-web overview](#) treats the method of reaching an observation as part of the record, not a separate ethical footnote.

Public viewing is not permitted research

Images of scientists handling wildlife can create a misleading precedent. Research involving close contact may depend on permits, trained staff, welfare procedures, and a specific justification. An image of such work is not an invitation to repeat it. Nor does calling a holiday observation 'citizen science' create permission to disturb an animal or enter a restricted area.

Useful public notes can remain modest: broad location where appropriate, date, viewing duration, method, and behaviour observed without approach. Exact locations may need to be withheld where sharing would encourage crowding or reveal a sensitive site. Our [communities and livelihoods](#) page explains why access and the authority to share information should not be assumed by an outside observer.

The same honesty applies to this journal's imagery. Its generated scenes illustrate ideas; they do not document real encounters or demonstrate compliance with a field protocol. That boundary is explained in [Sources and methods](#). Respectful observation is not proved by a beautiful result. It is made through the choices that determine whether an animal has to respond to us at all.

References

1. NOAA's marine-life viewing guidance ([fisheries.noaa.gov](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov))