



Major shipping company shifts lanes to help save Sri Lankan blue whales

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The world's largest shipping and logistics conglomerate, MSC Group, is adjusting its ship routeing south of Sri Lanka to reduce collision risk with endangered blue whales after environmental NGOs OceanCare and IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare) approached MSC Group to help protect these whales. The decision means that transiting MSC container ships will now avoid an area where the majority of the northern Indian Ocean blue whales population are known to congregate.

The waters off the southern tip of Sri Lanka present a challenge to mariners because of the high risk of collisions with blue whales, whale watching boats and small fishing vessels. Unusually for the species, Sri Lankan blue whales are found in these waters year round, and the current international shipping lanes off Dondra Head take ships right through the area with the most whales and whale watching activity.

"By making these small changes, MSC is making a significant difference for these endangered whales. Whales often die as a result of collisions and this population is at risk. Ship strikes are both a conservation and a welfare problem, and even one whale being hit is one too many," comments Sharon Livermore, Director of Marine Conservation at IFAW.

"Re-routeing is the key hope to turn the tide for blue whales off Sri Lanka. It also demonstrates to the Sri Lankan government that now is the time to take appropriate action and move the shipping lane out of blue whale habitat for all merchant vessels" states Nicolas Entrup, Director International Relations at OceanCare.

Scientific surveys of blue whale distribution conducted off Sri Lanka in the current shipping lanes and further offshore found that if shipping were to transit 15nm south (offshore) of the current routes, the risk of ship strikes to blue whales would be reduced by 95 percent.

The World Shipping Council, other key shipping industry organisations and the International Whaling Commission are all fully supportive of establishing a recognised shipping route further offshore, both to protect whales and to improve shipping safety. However, calls to the Government of Sri Lanka have been unheeded to date. By choosing to transit further offshore, MSC is proactively putting the re-routeing option into practice, but the majority of shipping still transits through the whales' core habitat. In June, in response to outreach by IFAW and OceanCare, the German Shipowners Association (VDR) also called upon its members to re-route. The next step is for the Sri Lankan government to bring forward a proposal to the International Maritime Organization to make the safer, offshore route an official Traffic Separation Scheme.

Blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) are the largest living animals on earth with an estimated life span of 80 to 90 years. Blue whales off Sri Lanka grow to around 25 metres in length and are vocally distinct from other blue whales. Blue whales are listed as 'endangered' on the IUCN Red List. The waters from the southwest to eastern Sri Lanka have also been identified as an Important Marine Mammal Area (IMMA) by the IUCN SSC-WCPA Marine Mammal Protected Area Task Force.

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You can find [images here](#). For more information or to arrange interviews please contact:

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