

MARINE OCCURRENCE REPORT

GROUNDING

OF THE WHALE-WATCHING
EXCURSION CRAFT "SHARP POINT"
ON FLORES ISLAND, SHELTER INLET, B.C.

08 AUGUST 1996

REPORT NUMBER M96W0183

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) investigated this occurrence for the purpose of advancing transportation safety. It is not the function of the Board to assign fault or determine civil or criminal liability.

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Summary

The small boat "SHARP POINT", while en route to pick up passengers for a whale-watching excursion, ran aground at about 1600 at full cruising speed on the north shore of Flores Island in Shelter Inlet, B.C. when the operator apparently fell asleep. The grounding caused extensive damage and buckling to the entire bow end of the boat. The boat's operator was rescued by another whale-watching boat in the vicinity. He had suffered multiple head injuries, and was the subject of a MEDEVAC air-lift to hospital at Tofino, B.C. for initial treatment, and later to another hospital in Victoria, B.C.

Ce rapport est également disponible en français.

¹ All times are PDT (UTC minus 7 hours)

Other Factual Information

Particulars of Vessel

Name:	"SHARP POINT"
Port of Registry:	Unregistered
Flag:	Canadian
Official Number:	N.A.
Type:	Cabin cruiser
Gross Tonnage:	Under 5 Tons
Crew:	One
Length:	9m
Built:	1996, Port Alberni, B.C.
Propulsion:	Dual ropellers
Power:	Single 228 HP Volvo,
Owners:	Jamie's Whaling Station, Tofino, B.C.

The "SHARP POINT" is a small aluminum cabin cruiser of welded construction, conventional framing and simple "vee" hull form with a transom stern. The aluminum cabin, which comprises the helm area and seating for 12 passengers, extends to the bow of the vessel.

The steering wheel with a helmsman's seat is located at the forward starboard end of the cabin. The cabin has hand railings at the stern and on the reinforced roof for the safety of standing passengers engaged in whale-watching.

The "SHARP POINT" is powered by a turbo-charged diesel engine. The engine drives two shafts and stainless steel propellers. The cruising speed of the boat is approximately 30 knots.

The boat had only 310 hours of operation up to the time of the occurrence, having been built during 1996. The shipyard had built similar boats for other clients in the past.

The owner had not yet licensed the "SHARP POINT", although by law it was required to be licensed prior to its operation. As the boat is under 5 tons and does not carry more than twelve passengers, there is no requirement to have it inspected as a passenger vessel.

The operator is uncertificated and is not required to possess any certificates to operate the "SHARP POINT". He did not have any experience in operating a boat like the "SHARP POINT" but had operated fast zodiacs in the whale watching industry.

Whale-watching daytime excursions are run all through the summer from Tofino and the passengers go ashore at Hot Springs Cove, about thirty miles from Tofino to view the thermal water springs before returning. The working day of the operator of the "SHARP POINT" was

normally from eight to ten hours but could extend on certain days to a maximum of eleven and half hours. The operator worked for five days on this schedule, from Monday to Friday. He was then relieved by another operator who worked the same length of shift on the weekend.

Having been off-duty from the previous evening, the operator commenced work at 0800 on Friday, 8 August 1996. He made an outbound trip and disembarked passengers at Hot Springs Cove.

As was usual on those days when there were more passengers than could be accommodated in one trip, the operator made a second trip in the morning to transport passengers to Hot Springs Cove. Each round trip from Tofino took from two and a half to three hours. The operator took his meal breaks whenever he could, between delivery and collection trips. He usually ate on the job.

In the afternoon, the operator transported one group of passengers from Hot Springs Cove to Tofino and was on his second outbound trip from Tofino to embark the remainder of the passengers at Hot Springs Cove.

The weather was calm, sunny and warm.

At about 1600, as the boat transited Shelter Inlet at its cruising speed of about thirty knots, it ran into the North end of Flores Island. The front end of the boat was completely crushed and the operator, who had been sitting at the helm, was severely injured.

The operator has no recollection of the events prior to him running aground at high speed.

As was the practice when running without passengers, the operator used the inside waters of the islands, passing to the eastward of Flores Island. The outside, rougher and usually slower, ocean passage to the west of Flores Island was reserved for only the loaded trips back to Tofino. On these passages the passengers could engage in whale-watching. The inside passage has calmer waters. It is tortuous for navigating a fast craft, passes through various reefs and islands, and is longer.

Two other boats of different companies operating on the same route saw the "SHARP POINT" beached on Flores Island at about 1630 with the engine still running at full ahead. On checking, they found the semi-conscious operator with injuries to his face and head.

They broadcast a Mayday message by Very High Frequency radio on Channel 16. The message was received by the Operations Centre of the Marine Communication and Traffic Services at Amphitrite Point, B.C. The Canadian Coast Guard Search and Rescue unit responded from Tofino and arranged a medivac by private aircraft within the hour.

The operator was first taken to hospital at Tofino for initial treatment. From there he was airlifted to another hospital in Victoria for further surgery, mainly to his head and face.

Analysis

Because excursion-craft owners wish to optimize the tourist market during the whale-watching season, these craft are operated from early morning until late daylight hours. At such times, the single operator is taxed to the limit and can be overcome by fatigue and the monotony of the operation.

The operator had been working for about eight hours when the accident occurred. He is unable to recollect what happened prior to striking the beach but the information available indicates that he fell asleep.

Most of the small whale-watching vessels are uninspected and the operators uncertificated. Information and publicity could serve to educate operators on the causes of fatigue and loss of alertness, and to reduce the incidence of operators falling asleep while on watch.

In some sectors of the marine industry the "one man watch" is becoming the norm. Because of the noise, boredom, solitude and the long hours worked by such watchkeepers, a lack of alertness and fatigue have been found to be more prevalent than amongst those keeping more traditional watches. Technical solutions to the problem are being actively pursued around the world.

Findings

1. As a result of running aground at full speed on Flores Island, the "SHARP POINT" was extensively damaged and its operator severely injured.
2. The "SHARP POINT" was in its first year of operation. The vessel was not licensed as required.
3. The operator on the "SHARP POINT" was uncertificated and was not experienced in operating such a boat. Moreover there is no certification or experience requirement to operate such a boat.
4. The operator has no recollection of the events prior to the occurrence.
5. The information available indicates that the operator probably fell asleep at the wheel.

Causes and Contributing Factors

The "SHARP POINT" ran aground at Flores Island due to the sole operator apparently falling asleep at the wheel. A long, warm, work day, with calm weather and boredom, contributed to the accident.

Action Taken

The owner has reported that they have replaced the "SHARP POINT" with a properly licensed boat. Further it was reported that to reduce the risks generated by a tired operator running their boats, the number of work days per week for each operator have been reduced to three days, the operator is changed for the final run of the day if required, and radio checks from the owner's office are maintained at 20 minute intervals."

This report concludes the Transportation Safety Board's investigation into this occurrence. Consequently, the Board, consisting of Chairperson Benoît Bouchard, and members Maurice Harquail, Charles Simpson and W.A. Tadros, authorized the release of this report on 28 January 1998.