Development of sustainable cetacean watching in Peru

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to reduce demand for black market dolphin meat, Mundo Azul, a Peruvian non-governmental organization (NGO), international NGOs, Peruvian government agencies, and the U.S. State Department are sponsoring a project to foster the development of sustainable cetacean watching in coastal communities, as a viable economic alternative to hunting and an incentive to protect coastal habitat. In 2006 and 2007, numerous workshops took place in various municipalities and an international conference was held in Lima, to address various aspects of cetacean watching. Two documents, one a national strategy for developing sustainable cetacean watching in Peru and one a generic plan for developing sustainable cetacean watching world-wide, have been produced as part of this project. Base-line research on bottlenose dolphins is on-going and dolphin watching pilot projects will be undertaken in the near future. Cetacean watching guidelines and monitoring programs will be established as soon as possible.

BACKGROUND

In Peru, the hunting of small cetaceans by local fisherman for human consumption has been commonplace for many years. In 1990, and again in 1994, the Ministry of Fisheries issued a national ban on the capture and trade of dolphins or dolphin products.[1] Despite this effort to halt the practice, the number of dolphins and porpoises killed rose to 20,000 per year (Van Waerebeek and Reyes 1994), and in 1996 dolphin hunting and the consumption of cetacean meat was prohibited by law.[2] The number of small cetaceans killed for human consumption decreased dramatically. Nevertheless, according to recent estimates[3], perhaps as many as 3000 small cetaceans, but certainly a sufficient number to fuel a black market, are still illegally killed for human consumption each year. Dolphin meat can be found fairly readily on the black market in locations close to the capital, and it is much more openly traded in the provinces.

The majority of fishermen are aware that killing dolphins is illegal, but supplementing income is a strong incentive to continue the practice. An on-going project, sponsored in part by a U.S. State Department grant, seeks to foster the development of sustainable dolphin (and other marine life) tourism, in an effort to replace the income from dolphin killing with an income from dolphin watching. A primary goal of the project is to provide incentive to the Peruvian government and local communities to protect coastal marine habitat.

STATUS OF PROJECT

In April 2006, three separate 2-day workshops were held in Lima, Trujillo, and Iquitos. The workshops were co-sponsored by the Peruvian non-governmental organization (NGO) Mundo Azul and the Peruvian tourism agency PromPeru. Representatives from Humane Society International (an international animal protection NGO based in Washington, DC), the Oceanic Society (a U.S. NGO based in San Francisco, involved in cetacean watching), and Fundacite Aragua (a Venezuelan NGO involved in cetacean watching and marine education) also participated as speakers. Municipal, provincial, and federal officials, local tour operators, fishermen, NGOs, and other potential stakeholders in the development of sustainable cetacean watching were invited and approximately 30-60 participants from these various stakeholder groups attended each workshop (for a total of 120 participants). The workshops presented information on Peruvian marine mammal (particularly cetacean) species, threats facing marine mammals, and cetacean watching codes of conduct and guidelines. Codes and guidelines considered included examples from the United States and Belize. Presentations at the workshops also offered descriptions of case studies of other locations (Mexico and Nepal) where cetacean watching had developed – sustainably and unsustainably. A SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) was conducted by the participants, in break-out groups consisting of representatives of as many of the stakeholder groups as possible. The products of these break-out sessions were to be incorporated into a "national strategy" for the development of cetacean watching in Peru.

In November and December 2006, training workshops were held in Lima, Trujillo, and Chimbote. These were co-sponsored by Mundo Azul, Humane Society International, and the U.S. State Department. Presentations familiarized the participants, most of them law enforcement officers, with the background and history of cetaceans in Peru, as well as Peruvian wildlife and environmental laws and regulations governing dolphin protection. A major purpose of these workshops was to train local law enforcement officers to conduct undercover investigations, to recognize dolphin meat in local markets, and to collect the necessary evidence

[1] Resolución Ministerial 569-90-PE and Resolución Ministerial 321-94-PE. A previous Decree, 943-73-AG was issued in 1973 to protect freshwater dolphins.
[2] Ley Nº 26585, implemented by Decreto Supremo Nº 002-96-PE
[3] Estimates from surveys conducted by ProNaturaleza (Fundación Peruana para la Conservación de la Naturaleza) in 2004.

when making arrests. Raids were conducted on several markets and illegal dolphin meat was confiscated and several arrests were made.

In February 2007, a two-day international conference, with presenters from Peru, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Brazil, the U.S., and with experience in the Caribbean and other South American countries, was held in Lima. This event was also an opportunity to introduce two documents – a national strategy for developing sustainable cetacean watching in Peru (Austermühle 2007) and a general "blueprint" for the development of sustainable cetacean watching world-wide (Hoyt 2007). The national strategy took into consideration the SWOT analyses done in the April workshops and discussed the specific advantages and disadvantages facing Peru in this endeavour. The blueprint synthesizes the guidelines/regulations and experiences of numerous countries to devise a 14-step process for developing cetacean watching – steps that can be tailored for a location's specific characteristics – in a manner that results in minimum impact to the animals and maximum benefit for local communities.

FOLLOW-UP AND CONCLUSIONS

Peru is in a unique position to take advantage of the mistakes, successes, and experiences of other countries that have witnessed the development (sustainably and unsustainably) of cetacean watching. Base-line research (*e.g.*, photo-ID, distribution, behaviour) has been conducted for several years in Paracas (http://www.acorema.org.pe/) and is on-going between Lima and Isla Asia (100km of coastline) and in Paracas (Austermühle, pers. comm.; http://www.acorema.org.pe/). Clearly wherever cetacean watching may develop, such research programs should be established immediately (Hoyt 2007; IWC 2006) – the lack of adequate base-line data, against which to compare observations that may indicate changes or harmful effects, has been identified as a common deficiency where cetacean watching occurs (*e.g.*, Bejder *et al*. 2006). Peru can avoid this deficiency, by conducting research *before* cetacean watching develops to any significant extent. In addition, a control area, adjacent to a population targeted for watching, but where cetacean watching vessels would be excluded, can and should be established once cetacean watching is initiated.

Establishing adequate monitoring to determine impacts (if any) of cetacean watching as it gets underway is essential (and is another of the 14 steps described in Hoyt [2007]). As cetacean watching develops along Peru's coast, it must do so alongside monitoring programs that both evaluate potential impacts from the cetacean watching activity and the cetacean watchers' adherence to guidelines or regulations.

The project now moves into a phase of practical application of the outputs of the workshops and the Lima conference. As noted above, research programs have been established in at least two locations. One or more pilot projects will be pursued, where local fishermen will be trained to conduct dolphin watching tours and support on-going research efforts. The participation of other tourism operators (such as hotels and restaurants) will also be sought. Guidelines and/or regulations will be established that are appropriate for the local species (mostly bottlenose dolphins, *Tursiops truncatus*) and the local communities. Hoyt (2007) considers basic elements of such guidelines (*e.g.*, approach distances, time/area closures), but these should be modified as necessary to maximize the likelihood that they will be followed and that they will be effective for the local cetacean groups targeted for watching.

In addition, Hoyt (2007), which has been translated into Spanish, will be distributed in other countries, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America, especially in areas where cetaceans are unsustainably exploited or impacted by local activities.

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