Swim-With-Dolphin Activities in the Azores – Steps towards Sustainability

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ABSTRACT
Swim-with-dolphin tourism is increasing worldwide, and with the success of this industry detrimental effects on the animals are feared. Here, we describe the swim-with activities based on wild dolphins carried out in the Azores to date. A distinction is made between *On-the-day swim-with trips*, where tourists are taken out to sea on a day to day basis, with genrally little instruction given; and *Guided swim-with tours*, which last several days and give profound instruction about snorkelling in general and the swimming attempt itself. We argue that the concept of Guided swim-with tours is a practicable way to minimize the disturbance of dolphins in their natural habitat, as well as to cope with safety risks when placing - sometimes unexperienced - swimmers in open water cetacean habitats.

KEYWORDS: WHALE WATCHING; SWIM-WITH-DOLPHINS; AZORES; SUSTAINABILITY; CONSERVATION

INTRODUCTION

Commercial swim-with-dolphins operations are thriving on a global scale (Samuels et al., 2003). Around the world there are many on-going studies into the interactions of dolphins with tour boats. Frequently it is shown that these interactions can directly affect the natural behaviour of the dolphins involved. Often it is after many years of these studies that the detrimental effects to the animals become apparent (Constantine, 2001; Weir, 2001; Bejder & Samuels, 2006, Samuels et al., 2003).

Since boat-based whale watching activities in the Azores began in 1991 there have been excursions available which include opportunities to swim with whales and dolphins. In 1999 a code of conduct was written into law. At this time the activity of swimming with whales (i.e. large cetaceans, mostly sperm whales) was stopped. However, swimming with dolphins was, and still is, allowed with five species (Assembleia Legislativa Regional dos Açores, 1999).

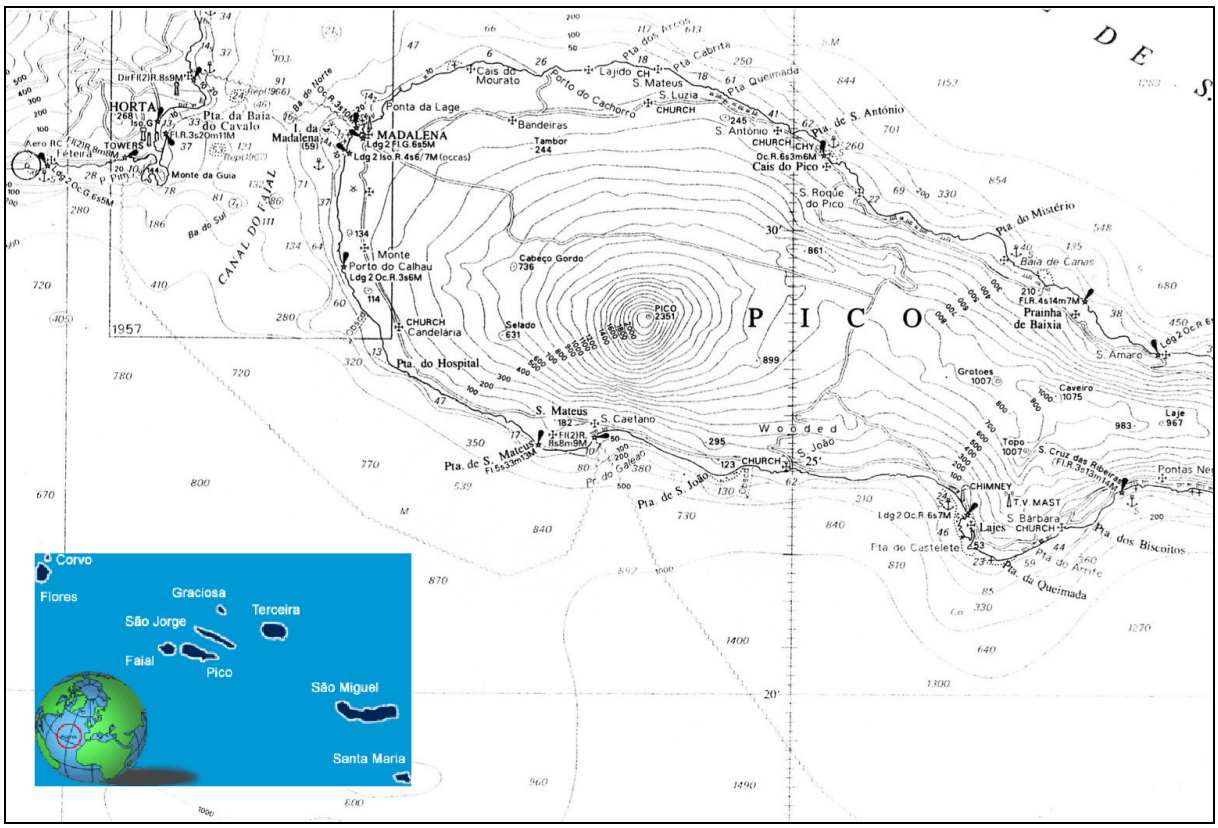
Whale watching in the Azores is conducted between April and October. There are several companies which in total run 20 licensed boats permitted to operate around three of the islands in the central group, Sao Jorge, Faial and Pico. Of these operators several are involved in swim-with trips. Dolphin swim activity usually commences in June and runs to the end of September, sometimes into early October (see also Hoyt, 2001).

Swim-With-Dolphin Tourism in the Azores

There are six operators, using at least 10 boats, offering swim-with trips, two on Faial and four on Pico. They operate in the following areas: Sao Jorge Channel, North and South of Fiail and South of the Island of Pico, starting from the Ports of Horta on Fiail and Madalena and Lajes on Pico (see Figure 1).

Weather and number of clients permitting, trips are run between 09.00 and 18.00 on a daily basis from May until October. However, predominately in late July and August, which is high season, some tours are commencing later in the afternoon and continue until 20.00. The duration of each trip is approximately three hours.
During high season, there may be up to ten “swim-with boats” at sea during the same day. These may all be targetting the same species, possibly even the same group.
In most cases dolphins are spotted by the “Vigia”, a land based lookout, however opportunistic encounters also occur. Radio contact between the Vigia and the boat skipper guides the boat to the sighting area where the decision as to whether or not the species of dolphin located is suitable for a swim-with encounter is made by, and is the sole responsibility of, the skipper.

Figure 1: Map of one of the main areas used for whale watching off the islands of Pico and Faial (Azores, Portugal). Inset shows overview of the archipelago.



All boats have a 2nd skipper who assists the clients when entering the water and when returning to the boat, and also observes the swimmers whilst in the water. The law permits two swimmers only to be in the water at the same time during an encounter with dolphins. The in-water encounters are allowed up to a maximum duration of 15 minutes (Assembleia Legislativa Regional dos Açores, 1999).

There are, in general, two types of guest: a) Guests with expectations that are realistic and who know how to use a snorkel, mask and fins, consequently being easier to help with their techniques. These guests are also often more aware that it is not always possible to swim, and generally they are satisfied about what the experience has to offer them.
b) Guests that aren't familiar with the water and have no experience with a snorkel, mask and fins. Their physical condition may be limited and often their expectations are unrealistic, and some have little understanding about what will happen during the trip.

Five dolphin species are currently subjected to swim-with trips, with varying intensity according to the behavioural traits of the species: Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), Atlantic spotted dolphins (*Stenella frontalis*), Common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*), Striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) and Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*).
The highest numbers of sightings, and consequently the highest number of interactions, take place in a concentrated area South of Pico due to the "Vigia" situated at Ponta da Queimada on the coast, east of Lajes (see Figure 1) and other sites on the south coast, e.g. Pt de Sao Mateus, Pt de Queimada, Ribeiras and Calheta.
Three companies operating from Lajes use different Vigias however on occasion the sharing of information occurs between skippers and Vigias, and radio channel eavesdropping is frequent. There are seven boats used by three operators working out of Lajes, the main port on Pico. However it should be understood that boats from Madalena and from Horta on Faial, can also be found working in these areas if there are no observations of target swim-with species closer to their "home" areas.

The operators offering swim-with programs in the Azores come from differing backgrounds and accordingly these operators offer programs which give varying degrees of instruction to clients in preparation for their swim-with encounters. Two types of programs can be distinguished: on-the-day swim-with operations and guided swim-with tours.

On-the-Day Swim-With Trips[1]
All except one of the companies offer on-the-day swim-with excursions. These excursions last 3-4 hours and offer the minimum of instruction in most cases and none in others. Tourists are taken out to sea, and in the event of an encounter with dolphins they are allowed to enter the water. Some operators offer guarantees and money back offers to clients who do not see or fail to swim with dolphins. A minimum of instruction is given to the clients about the way to enter the water, approach the dolphins and how to behave when dolphins are close. Personal experience by one of us (M.B.) shows that a human/dolphin encounter in most cases is initiated by the human. As there is very little time to check out the suitability of the dolphin group for a swim-with encounter approaches can be aggressive. Some clients have never used snorkeling equipment, and many have never swum in the open ocean. There are also instances of more than two people being allowed in the water at the same time.

Guided Swim-With Tours[2]
Two operators (*Espaco Talassa* and *Pico Sport*) are currently offering the possibility of joining a week long program which includes instruction. Here, the conduct of one of these operators will be described in detail.

Espaco Talassa was established in 1991 by Serge Viallelle and was the first company on the Island of Pico to establish a whale watch base and to use a Vigia. The company, like many others working in this field, is committed to offering sustainable tourism in all its forms and is constantly reviewing its aims and policies to this end. *Espaco Talassa* previously offered on-the-day swim-with excursions, but does not do so any more. This is a choice that has been made by the company in response to their experience of such excursions (Serge Viallelle, pers. comm.).

From this stance the company has developed a way of working that ensures proper information and instruction for clients partaking in their "swim with" holidays whilst trying to ensure the least possible disturbance to the dolphins. A model of "best practice" was

[1,2] For the whale watching terminology see IWC, 2006

developed in conjunction with the UK Company *Dolphin Connection*. Clients are given instructions and training before any swim-with encounter with dolphins. This begins at the time the clients book their holidays, at which time they are asked to provide information about their health and their previous experience with regard to their swimming and snorkeling ability.

On site, only snorkeling equipment is allowed, no dive gear can be used, and clients are advised to wear short wet suit to offer some buoyancy and protection. When clients arrive they are further briefed about the way in which the swim-with activity will be conducted:

- All clients attend a briefing given by a marine biologist where they are informed about the different cetaceans, particularly the dolphin species with which they are liable to swim-with and what to expect from these encounters.
- The dedicated 2nd skipper or guide will then take his clients into the harbour or a pool to check their swimming ability, snorkeling ability and their snorkeling equipment.
- Instruction will also be given to clients on how to move in the water using their fins, so as to eliminate as much noise made when they are swimming as possible.

At the beginning of the first trip out to sea the skipper takes the boat to a clear sea area and the clients are given further instruction. This includes

- How to enter the water from the boat in a way that will cause minimum disturbance.
- The 2nd skipper or a lifesaver guide will demonstrate this to the clients, who will then also enter the water from the boat.
- This is also an opportunity for the clients to experience snorkeling in places where the bottom is not visible, and to check their swimming technique and the suitability of their equipment.

The 2nd skipper or lifesaver/guide will take note of the ability and confidence of the clients in the water from which he/she will be able to judge which clients, and in which situations they should enter the water to swim with dolphins. The boat is then taken to an area where dolphins have been sighted.

The dolphins are always approached from the rear or from the side at the rear. The skipper will usually try to identify the species and the behavioural state as well as the group composition before approaching closer.
On some occasions the boat will overtake the dolphins, or the dolphins will be approaching or passing close to the boat. In this case the clients will be put into the water as the dolphins approach and/or pass, or they will swim a little distance in order to be in the path of the approaching dolphins and so observe them pass by.
On other occasions the dolphins approach the boat of their own accord. In this case the skipper will stay with the dolphins and wait for them to slow or start to circle in the vicinity of the boat, at which time it might become possible to allow clients to enter the water.
At the start of some encounters, when the boat approaches the group of dolphins from behind and from an angle, eventually the paths of the boat and the dolphins will converge at which point the clients will enter the water. This has to be done so as not to cross the path of the dolphins, which can cause directional changes or deep diving in order to avoid the boat and/or swimmers (Assembleia Legislativa Regional dos Açores, 1999).
The dolphins are first observed from the boat so that clients can see how approaches are made to the dolphins by the boat. The skipper will often interpret the dolphins' behaviour to the client. He will also assess the possibility of initiating a swim-with encounter. This will depend upon his interpretation of the group's behaviour and suitability, i.e. the presence of calves, the animals' activity and the vicinity of other boats and other species.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Several studies have proven that swim-with activities can have strong effects on cetacean populations by disturbing the animals (e.g. Ritter, 1996; Constantine, 2001; Weir, 2001; Courbis, 2004, Samuels et al., 2003) . It is clear that some species receive a lot of interference to their daily routine by virtue of the number of vessels trying to interact with them (Ritter, 2003; Samuels et al., 2003). The sustainability and future of swim-with activities in the Azores, at present a fast growing market, depends greatly on the well being and continued abundance of the dolphin species found in these waters. Hoyt (2001) stated that a precautionary approach for the whale watching tourism in the Azores is strongly advised and that there is a need for better regulation of boat numbers, licenses and enforcement.

There clearly is a great disparity in the conduct of the different types of excursions. Concerning the on-the-day trips, the way some of these excursions are offered can create a pressure for the operators and the skippers to push codes of conduct and laws to, and beyond, their limits. Often this is induced by the fact that some companies offer guarantees and money back offers to clients. Given the short duration of the trips, usually up to a maximum of three hours, this exerts further pressure on skippers to ensure that clients do indeed swim with dolphins.

The fact that sometimes more than two swimmers will enter the water during on-the-day swim-with-trips is a breach of the code of ethics and of the law, which could bring serious problems for all companies offering swim-with activities in the Azores. Moreover, it is questionable whether the skipper and the 2nd skipper can maintain contact with the clients, and control of the boat, whilst there are more than two clients in the water at the same time engaged in a swim-with activity. Scarpaci et al. (2003) likewise found a high degree of non-compliance with swim-with regulations in Victoria, Australia.
Clearly, the success of the in-water encounters will depend on the experience of the swimmers. People unfamiliar with snorkelling gear will behave differently than good swimmers and snorkellers. Through their behaviour, the swimmers also will determine the degree of disturbance they will cause to the dolphins. Several studies have related the operator strategies in placing boats relative to dolphins to diffent behavioural responses (e.g. Constantine & Baker, 1997; other examples given in Samuels et al., 2003). However, no attempt to date has been made to identify if there is a correlation between the actual swimmer behaviour and the reactions of the animals.

These excursions are happening in the North Atlantic Ocean, in deep offshore waters and sometimes in rough weather conditions, which are often suitable for watching cetaceans but not for swimming. The dolphins are free ranging and are “not habituated” to humans (see terminology used by Samuels et al., 2003). Usually, for both humans and dolphins alike these excursions may constitute the first ever encounter between the two parties. In such a situation it should be expected that the tour operators knows the ability, experience and physical health of their clients before they enter the ocean on a swim-with trip with free ranging wild dolphins, especially as dangerous encounters with wild unhabituated cetaceans have been documented (Shane, 1993). Indeed, in the Azores it is a requirement of the law to provide experienced personnel that inform the tourists properly about the swim-with dolphins activity (Assembleia Legislativa Regional dos Açores, 1999). On-the-day swim-with trips, by virtue of the pressure that they produce, and the problems that are likely to occur from inadequate instruction and information given to clients, could, in the long term, threaten the activity of swimming with dolphins in the Azores.

In contrast, by allowing time for the encounters to happen through offering a program of five or six swim-with trips as a package, guided swim-with tours take the pressure off the companies and the skippers to produce "instant" in-water encounters. It allows more time and space for the encounters to happen and with much less chance of the codes and laws being pushed beyond their boundaries. Clients have the time to better understand the companies, and the skippers' way of working, and as a consequence fully comprehend more what a privilege it is to witness wild dolphins in their natural environment.

In conclusion, it is most important that swim-with cetacean operators know their clients, and ensure that they are properly informed and instructed with regard to the dolphins and the most appropriate way to conduct these activities. Thus, the concept of guided swim-with tours which offer good instruction, training and education, can serve as a model for (more) sustainable swim-with cetacean tourism. It would be prudent to adopt such a sensitive approach in more cases of interaction with cetaceans in the Azores and elsewhere.

Finally, there exists a unique opportunity to study the interaction of dolphins with swimmers in the Azores, and especially to document behavioural reactions to both types of swim-with operations described here, as this has rarely, if at all, been done so far. As the importance of longitudinal monitoring of human impact situations has been highlightd (see Samuels et al., 2003), we recommend that in-detail studies dealing with this important issue should be conducted in the future.

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