
Responsible whale watching: the way forward.

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Abstract

A brief statement is provided here of the factors that may be said to constitute responsible whale-watching.

Keywords: whale watching, precautionary management.

Since its inception as a commercial endeavour in the mid-1950s, whale watching has grown immensely. Public interest in these charismatic mammals has never been greater and the industry now attracts more than 9 million participants across 87 countries and is valued at over one billion USD annually (Hoyt 2001). This figure is estimated to increase at an annual rate in excess of 5%.

The potential fiscal benefits of whale watching are numerous and include, amongst others, the generation of income to local communities, the provision of jobs and the funding and development of the local tourism infrastructure and attendant services.

However, while whale watching is arguably also at the forefront of 'ecotourism' and viewing cetaceans in the wild is considered by most to be preferable to visiting a captive facility, it is essential that the experience on offer is of a sufficiently high standard to benefit not only the operators and local communities seeking a livelihood, but also the participants, cetaceans and the marine environment as a whole.

WDACS has recently codified the criteria which we believe must be met in order for whale watching to be truly responsible and sustainable to cetaceans and the marine environment, and truly beneficial to passengers, operators and communities. We present this here as a 'straw-man' document for others to consider and in the hope that experts in the field will respond with their thoughts.

Some of the world's most successful whale watching companies meet WDACS's definition of high-quality whale watching. In order to qualify, trips must offer:

- A prime recreational and educational experience for participants which motivates them to care about cetaceans and the sea and to work for marine conservation;
- An experience that seeks to reduce the impact on whales, so that whales are watched with the lightest 'footprint' possible;
- Opportunities for researchers to gather scientific information and disseminate findings to managers and the public;
- An experience built around a naturalist or nature guide who can provide accurate information, help to find the whales and describe their behaviour, and successfully build the bridge between the urban participant and the sea;
- The active involvement of the community or region in its work, enabling communities and regions to have a financial as well as a personal interest in whale watching and the conservation of cetaceans and the sea.

(Source: Hoyt/WDACS, 2005)

In addition we seek to promote situations where research is being conducted such that the cetaceans that are the focus of the whale watching industry are also being carefully monitored over the longer term. Cetaceans are subjected to many pressures in the modern world and we believe that such monitoring can help to determine their status and the potential sustainability of the factors that may be affecting them, including whale watching.

Sadly, in the majority of cases, cetacean-focused tourism involves the targeting of specific cetacean communities that are repeatedly sought out for prolonged, often close up encounters. As the demand for more frequent and intimate encounters increases, it can be argued that is the responsibility of conservation authorities and the scientific community to assess the effects of these activities upon the animals. It can also be suggested that the industry itself has some responsibility in this matter as well. So, while the advantages to the industry in pursuing cetacean-focused tourism are clear there is, equally, a need to address the issue of whether or not the effect on the animals themselves is negligible and equally whether tourists do actually achieve heightened, long lasting appreciation of the marine environment (e.g. Manfredo *et al.* 1995; Goodwin 1996).

While short-term behavioural responses by cetaceans to boat-based operations have been well documented (Janik and Thompson, 1996) until recently, our understanding of how these short-term responses translate to longer term changes such as physical condition, reproductive rates, distribution and habitat has been poor.

However, recent findings offer ‘a cautionary tale’ and have provided biologically significant evidence showing:

- Mass movement of cetaceans away from areas where boat based cetacean watching tourism occurs (Lusseau, 2005);
- Significant impact on the reproductive success of targeted cetaceans (Bejder, 2005); and
- Significant reduction in resting and socialising behaviour of targeted animals in the vicinity of cetacean watching vessels (Constantine *et al.*, 2004).

Negative effects of poorly-managed nature tourism are not restricted to behavioural changes in targeted cetaceans, which as we now know can have consequences for the wider population, but can also include serious and often fatal injury caused by vessel strike, as documented by Laist *et al.* (2001) and Jensen and Silber (2004). Whale-watching vessels are documented as having caused injuries to whales on various occasions as a result of trying to approach too closely, failing to handle their vessels with due care and attention when in the vicinity of cetaceans or simply by unfortunate accident

The recent increase in long-term behavioural studies is welcomed and these studies are finally providing regulatory bodies, wildlife managers and NGOs with the scientific data to inform enlightened, precautionary and effective management actions. Moreover, long-term strategic planning will help mitigate the impact of tourism on targeted animals and ensure a responsible and sustainable approach in appreciating cetaceans and their environment.

We look forward to receiving feedback to the ideas and criteria put forward here.

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