

AN OVERVIEW OF SUSTAINABLE, RESPONSIBLE WHALEWATCHING

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Dedicated, non-lethal research over the last few decades has increased our knowledge of whales. At the same time, a new, unexpected platform arose from a growing industry- whale watching.

Over the years the industry has grown beyond expectation, created a platform for research, conservation and public awareness and enriched the economy of communities.

This presentation will summarize the general growth, and highlight the educational, scientific and socio-economic benefits of whale watching, three components of a responsible industry. A fourth, critical element, the development of precautionary measures and regulation to protect the resources, in this case the whales and the marine environment that we share, will be discussed in another session.

THE WORLD-WIDE GROWTH AND EXTENT OF WHALE WATCHING

Today whale watching occurs in at least 119 countries and over 550 coastal communities, generating a direct income of over 2.1 billion US dollars (Economists At Large, 2009). In several communities around the world it has become a way of life. It has improved their understanding and appreciation of the sea. It has changed the way they work ...it has changed the way they live.

Whale watching is a viable economic alternative to whaling. In Brazil, former whalers actively participate in local whale weeks that highlight education and conservation of marine resources. In the Azores, vagias, once used for sighting whales for whaling operations, are now used by land-based spotters for whale watches and whale research. And in Japan, former harpooners now have successful whale watch operations in at least 2 areas.

In the Wider Caribbean region, whale watching is a growing, yet not fully realized component of tourism. Whale watching and swimming tours in the Region began in the 1980's in the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic and later off Dominica. Although detailed information for the Region is incomplete, there are at least 21 countries and territories that offer some form of marine mammal watching. These include land-based, vessel-based sightings and vessel-based listening tours as well as swim-with experiences, with vessel tours ranging from small zodiacs to cruise ships. Ten countries and territories have developed guidelines or codes of conduct for vessel operation, 4 have national regulation, and at least 5, operator associations. Although in its 3rd decade, there is a paucity of data on the types and extent of impacts the activities may have on marine mammals in the Region.

Nine countries or territories have potential to develop marine mammal watching activities in the future. This potential is based on the existing and somewhat limited knowledge of marine mammal distribution and accessibility but may be limited by economic constraints and lack of infrastructure.

On a more general note, much has changed during the last decade. Today's whale watcher travels the globe. They watch whales from all types of vessels- everything from cruise ships to zodiaks, and although boat-based whale watching is certainly the most common form, whales are also watched from land-based operations, from the air and from beneath the sea.

The potential and possibilities seem endless. What is not endless is the resource. Whales are not a limitless resource but a measurable entity. To maximize the conservation potential it is critical that all operations have a dedicated education and conservation component, and where possible, collect basic, scientific and environmental data.

WHALEWATCHING AS A PLATFORM FOR EDUCATION

One of the most valuable aspects of whale watching is its potential to educate people of all ages and from all backgrounds to appreciate, value and understand marine mammals; to connect us in a dramatic way to other species and to the ocean. Despite differences in culture, educational methods, platforms and species encountered, all whale watching should contain an educational component that adheres to a high standard of quality.

And education should be viewed in a wider context. Not only is it what is taught or learned informally from a whale watch boat, but how whale watching can be used in a formal educational setting, how ecotourism planners and operators can educate themselves and their clients and how whales can once again be the flagship species to teach and promote a wider environmental awareness and action. The hope and goal of whale watching education is to translate the whale watch experience to a wider audience and to inspire greater involvement and follow-up activity from those who participated. Education received on a whale watch is retained and changes the behavior of the passengers, making them more sensitive to whale, marine and other environmental and conservation issues.

Education and conservation awareness often begins with the whale-watching brochure. It should contain information about species and ecological systems, reflect a concern for conservation and where applicable, list local guidelines or regulations. But it is the role of the naturalist/ guide or in some instances captains, to interpret the experience to a wider audience and to inspire greater involvement.

Naturalists should be local people whenever possible. Local natural history, oceanography, geology, customs and folklore greatly compliment the knowledge imparted to whale watchers. This can have a global impact.

And whale watching can be used as an enticement to get students and teachers interested in local species and ecosystems and to stimulate an interest in formal schooling in cetology, ecology, oceanography and/or conservation biology.

WHALEWATCHING AS A PLATFORM FOR SCIENCE

Most of the near 83 species of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) are included in whale-watch programs. In some areas of the world, whale watch platforms are the only means to study cetacean populations, or discover new areas where they live, feed or breed.

The collection of basic information (type, number, location and behavior of whales or dolphins), combined with photographs of individual whales can greatly increase our understanding of their lives. Photographs of scars, injuries, lesions and entanglements help us to understand the threats that they face as well as the health of our oceans. Research also compliments the whale watch experience. In some areas, whale watchers learn about individuals and their family histories and become more interested and more involved. For example, in the North Atlantic, some individuals have been studied for at least 4 generations.

Such information collected on whale watch platforms and shared by scientists from various regions where a species occurs, can help us to better understand migratory routes and areas of critical habitat. And assist managers in making informed decisions on a national and international level.

One example is an effort to help protect the remaining 400 North Atlantic right whales. Off the east coast of the United States and in the Gerry E. Studds Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, a change in shipping lanes was recommended based on data primarily collected on whale watch vessels in the area from 1979 to 2004.

In summary, basic information collected on whale watch platforms can be instrumental in determining and protecting shared habitats that are critical for the breeding, feeding and migration of cetacean species,

COMMUNITY-BASED WHALEWATCHING

It is essential that whale-watching be community-based. Make local stakeholders the starting point of any plan to develop tourism to maximize local focus and control and ensure that training programs, job opportunities and other economic benefits stay within the community. Involve the local community from the first and continue to involve them to foster local stewardship,

In summary- A simple formula for creating conservation and ethics from whale watch excursions:

precautionary regulation + science + education + public and government awareness = conservation and protection of species and their habitats