

Whale watching in Europe

by Wouter Egas and Albert Salman

Whale watching has quickly developed as an alternative to whaling, with a far greater economic potential. While there is a moratorium on commercial whaling since 1986, whale watching is booming. It is potentially a sustainable activity where benefits outweigh the negative impacts. With the Coastal Guide to Europe, the EUCC is aiming to inform the public on sustainable ways of recreation and tourism in the European coast and sea. Therefore, an investigation into whale watching has started in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam. The first results are already on the Internet (www.coastalguide.to). You are invited to contribute.

Greenpeace defines whale watching as "the observation of any of the 83 species of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in their natural habitat from any type of platform". Because whales and dolphins are very intriguing to humans and the activity seems relatively harmless, whale watching could be an activity where the benefits outweigh the negative impacts. The question is to what extent this is the case in Europe at the moment. Therefore we are looking at some economic, social and environmental aspects of whale watching in Europe.

Benefits

Economically, whale watching is doing well. In Europe, the number of participants in 1998 was 1.4 million, spending €121 million. The number is increasing by 20% a year. There are whale watch

operators in 18 European countries and territories. Income and employment for local communities, education and research are important social aspects of whale watching. If wildlife becomes valuable for local people, they will have an incentive to conserve it. The communities Andenes (Norway), Dingle (Ireland) and Húsavík (Iceland) have gained substantial benefits although there are many cases where the benefits have gone to outsiders. Failure of fishing (and whaling) communities to take advantage of this new economic opening is clearly a missed opportunity. In some cases research is benefiting because whale watching offers a research platform. Next to whales, wider facets of marine ecology can be studied. Some whale watch operators also have a considerable educational component with a naturalist providing information about cetaceans and their marine environment. This potential for research and education is not yet fulfilled.

Environmental impacts

The sheer number of operators could potentially be harmful to whales and their environment. Concerns have arisen about impacts such as noise, pollution and disturbance which is why international organisations as well as local authorities and operators have developed codes of conduct. Possible impacts have to be avoided but at the same time compromises will have to be made and, operators who provide no benefits except to themselves and who have a sub-standard environmental performance need to be



Humpback (*Megaptera novaengliae*, Photo: The Cousteau Society)



Whalewatching (Photo: The Cousteau Society)

stopped. Unfortunately, whale watching is currently under-performing on the non-commercial side. In heavy competition and in the absence of rules, operators are getting as near to the whales as quickly as possible to get the best views. Inevitably, in the absence of good information, tourists are most likely to choose these operators because they generally have more money to advertise and they provide more spectacular 'entertainment'.

Regulation

It is clear that there is a need to regulate the operators. Because of the differences between species and geographical conditions worldwide, regulations are difficult but minimum guidelines are essential. Several bodies including the pro-whaling International Whaling Commission (IWC) as well as conservation organisations like the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) and Greenpeace have developed minimum guidelines aimed at providing a framework for local/national regulations. To be effective regulations must be established at a national level. In the Azores and the Canary Islands there are now regulations, in other countries they have yet to be established. Until that time, operators can continue with business as usual.

Inform us about your experiences

In the current situation of voluntary regulation it is also advisable to promote the good operators as well as prohibit the bad. Allowing tourists to be aware of the extent to which operators adhere to environmental principles can be influential since it can be assumed that the type of tourist who whale watches will be most likely to use

environmental criteria when choosing an operator. This is why the EUCC decided to highlight the issue. Information will be provided in the Coastal Guide to Europe on the environmental performance of operators and include an evaluation of them based upon the extent to which they adhere to various minimum guidelines (see box). The data will enable visitors to choose the more sustainable.

As part of this programme, we would like to ask you to contribute to this information by giving us your feedback after you went out whale watching. Therefore, if you have been on a whale watching trip in Europe, you are invited to give feedback on your experience. Please fill in the form on the Coastal Guide to Europe (www.coastalguide.to).

Guidelines for watching cetaceans

1. Do not go closer than 100m (WDCS)
2. With 2 or more boats not closer than 200m (WDCS)
3. Approach slowly from behind and to the side, not head on or directly behind (Hoyt)
4. Reduce speed, avoid sudden changes in speed in the vicinity of whales (Greenpeace)
5. Never move between, scatter or separate dolphins. If unsure of their movements, stop and put engine into neutral (WDCS)
6. Never swim with whales (WDCS)
7. Never swim with dolphins (WDCS)
8. Take special care with mothers and young (WDCS)
9. No longer than 15 minutes near them (WDCS)
10. No disposal of rubbish, litter or contaminants at sea (WDCS)
11. Do not feed them (Hoyt)
12. Reduce production of potentially disturbing sounds as far as possible, avoid sudden changes in noise (IWC)
13. Vessel design with minimal risk of injury e.g. shrouded propellers (IWC)
14. A naturalist on the boat to provide information (Greenpeace)
15. Provide tourists accurate and educational information guides and books (IWC)

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