

Whale watching and Caribbean island tourism

The Global whale watching industry

Whale watching is a \$1 billion USD industry, practised in more than 87 different countries and territories world wide, attracting over 9 million boat and land based participants per year. Total whale watching tourism expenditures have grown from an estimated US\$ 504 million in 1994 to an estimated US\$1,049 million in 1998 and are continuing to grow.ⁱ

The global whale watching industry has grown rapidly since its inception in the early 1980's. On average the number of whale watchers has increased by 21.1% per year from 1991 – 1998. The total expenditure whale watchers spent on tours alone has grown at a very similar rate - 21.4% per year. ⁱⁱ

Whale watching in the Caribbean

The Caribbean Sea covers 970,000 square miles and includes some of the deepest parts of the Atlantic Ocean, offering a diverse range of marine habitats to over 30 cetacean species. It is not surprising therefore that the region provides considerable opportunities for the development of whale watching. In fact, the West Indies and Central America have the second fastest growing whale watching industry of the world's continental regions - (47.4% in a decade)ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1999, whale watching occurred in 14 of the 23 countries and territories that make up the wider Caribbean, including Turks & Caicos Islands, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Guadeloupe, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines and Grenada.

A recent study by Erich Hoyt states that the Eastern Caribbean pioneers of the whale watching industry, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas now have flourishing Eco-tourist economies. The Dominican Republic nets \$5.2 million per annum, and the Bahamas gains £2.97 million per year.^{iv} The whale watching industry in Dominican Republic was given a boost by the creation of the Silver Bank Humpback Whale Marine Sanctuary.

The same report described the overall potential for developing whale watching in the Caribbean as 'considerable' to 'outstanding'.^v The islands that have 'outstanding' potential are those with accessible whale watching waters, a strong natural image and a pro-conservation stance. (This latter point is important as adopting a pro-conservation stance enables scientific research to be conducted.) Islands such as St Lucia and Dominica could fit these criteria, but are seen to be opposing conservation as they, along with four other Eastern Caribbean islands, vote in support of commercial whaling in the International Whaling Commission

(IWC). (See Greenpeace briefing 'Vote Buying - Japan's chosen strategy to secure a return to large-scale whaling'.)

By comparison, other countries such as Martinique and Turks & Caicos Islands have 'outstanding' potential across the board, as they support whale conservation. For instance, the Turks and Caicos hosted a marine mammal conference in March 2000 on 'Building a sustainable whale watching industry in the wider Caribbean'.

Successes of whale watching in the South Pacific

To gauge how successful whale watching could be in the Caribbean it is useful to look towards Vavu'a (part of the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific) as their industry is run in similar geographic conditions to those found in the Caribbean. However the whale watching operations in Vavu'a are considered to be about 5 years ahead of those in the Caribbean. Vava'u is the primary whale watching destination in the South Pacific region and in 1998 directly contributed US\$58,000 to the Eco-tourism economy per season. The indirect tourism expenditure from visitors who went whale watching within the same year was US\$1,173,622 per season.^{vi}

This calculation is not strictly representative of the impact whale watching has on the Tongan economy as it's hard to determine whether these tourists would have visited the region regardless of a whale watching attraction. Nevertheless it does provide an indication of the potential loss in tourism that would occur if people stopped whale watching.

Local tourism operators stress the importance of whale watching. In a poll carried out in the island in 1999, 8% of the operators said they felt whales were 'not important' to Vava'u as a tourist attraction, 30% said whales had become 'important' and 62% felt whales were 'extremely important' as a tourist attraction.^{vii}

This reliance on whales in the area has created a strong opposition to the resumption of commercial whaling in the region. Tourism operators and whale watch operators alike were unanimous in their agreement that a return to whaling practices of any type in Tonga would be detrimental to their business.^{viii}

Tourists visiting the island by air echoed this attitude towards commercial whaling, 21% of them 'disagreeing' with commercial whaling and 74% 'strongly disagreeing'.^{ix} Of the same sample 26% said they would be less likely to holiday at a location where whales were hunted, 52% 'strongly agreed' with the same statement.^x

This resounding opposition to commercial whaling is shared by the Pacific Island Forum and the South Pacific Regional Environment program ministers who are supporting the creation of a whale sanctuary in the South Pacific at the 2001 IWC meeting this July. The South Pacific was denied this whale sanctuary at the IWC last year by Japan and six eastern Caribbean states who blocked the vote. (See the Greenpeace briefing 'How the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary was defeated'.)

Whale watching Benefits

In addition to the economic benefits, whale watching has also been proved to offer major community benefits in the form of educational gains for local schools and colleges and a sense of pride that develops within whale watching communities. ^{xi}

Islands that adopt a conservation policy around their whale watching industry have reported even greater gains through the appreciation and awareness of marine conservation and a platform for cetacean scientific research. Other benefits directly attributed to the conservation of whales are seen in the flocks of wildlife photographers, writers and film/TV makers that come to whale conservation islands to record whale sightings. This type of media attention brings free international exposure to a region that may otherwise be overlooked. Whale watching and conservation has also proved to be essential to islands that base their tourism exposure on their natural, peaceful public image.

ⁱ **Erich Hoyt.** *IFAW report: Whale watching 2000: worldwide tourism numbers, expenditures and expanding socio-economic benefits.* (pg 17)

ⁱⁱ **Erich Hoyt.** *IFAW report: Whale watching 2000: worldwide tourism numbers, expenditures and expanding socio-economic benefits.* (pg 5-6)

ⁱⁱⁱ **Erich Hoyt.** *IFAW report: Whale watching 2000: worldwide tourism numbers, expenditures and expanding socio-economic benefits.* (pg 7)

^{iv} **Erich Hoyt.** *The potential of whale watching in the Caribbean: 1999+.* (pg 4)

^v **Erich Hoyt.** *The potential of whale watching in the Caribbean: 1999+.* (pg 5)

^{vi} **Mark Orams.** *The economic benefits of whale watching in Vava'u – the kingdom of Tonga.* (pg 51-52.)

^{vii} **Mark Orams.** *The economic benefits of whale watching in Vava'u – the kingdom of Tonga.* (pg 49.)

^{viii} **Mark Orams.** *The economic benefits of whale watching in Vava'u – the kingdom of Tonga.* (pg 48.)

^{ix} **Mark Orams.** *The economic benefits of whale watching in Vava'u – the kingdom of Tonga.* (pg 45.)

^x **Mark Orams.** *The economic benefits of whale watching in Vava'u – the kingdom of Tonga.* (pg 46.)

^{xi} **Erich Hoyt.** *IFAW report: Whale watching 2000: worldwide tourism numbers, expenditures and expanding socio-economic benefits.* (pg 12)