

Principles and Policy Guidelines on Whale Watching



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GREENPEACE

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Introduction

The World Ocean and Whales Under Threat

Humanity depends for its survival on the healthy functioning of the planet's ecosystems. The ocean was the origin of life on earth and it continues to provide much of the earth's rich evolutionary heritage.

The world ocean also provides many essential services: it plays a key role in regulating climate and recycling nutrients; it is a vital source of food and medicine; and it serves as a livelihood for entire human populations, communities and individuals alike. On a cultural and spiritual level, the ocean forms the basis of many values that give meaning to human societies.

The ocean sustains us, but we are not sustaining it.

The diversity of life in the world ocean is being dramatically altered by the excessive exploitation of whales, fish and other marine species. Many whale species are still struggling to recover from the devastating impact of commercial whaling. In addition, marine and coastal ecosystems, including habitats vitally important for feeding and rearing, are being rapidly degraded.

Not only is marine bio-diversity at risk, but also the livelihood and survival of those millions of people who depend on the sea. Industrial societies need to redefine their relationship with the ocean. A swift and fundamental transition to an ecologically responsible utilisation of the ocean is necessary.

Greenpeace believes that commercial whaling will always lead to over-exploitation. Moreover, whaling is a very narrow, short-sighted use of whales. There is a truly sustainable alternative – whale watching. When managed on sound ecological principles and designed to promote educational, scientific and conservation goals, as well as giving enjoyment to participants, it has the potential to become much more valuable to communities and countries than whaling could ever be.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) and its member states have accepted responsibility to design and implement programs for the effective management of whale watching operations. The whale watching industry shares this responsibility, and some operators are already proving that they

can conduct whale watching activities that will serve to protect cetaceans and marine biodiversity. Processes established to achieve ecologically responsible whale watching must minimise, and where possible eliminate, negative impacts on cetaceans that are the subject of whale watching operations.

The following Greenpeace Principles and Policy guidelines seek to address only the main significant general aspects of whale watching. Specific measures must be tailored by stakeholders in each whale watching community and country to meet local or regional conditions.

The Growth of the Whale Watching Industry

Many former whaling countries – including the United States, Australia, Brazil and the United Kingdom – stopped whaling when it became apparent that the industry was unsustainable and no longer inspired public support or confidence. They are among 87 countries and overseas territories where an industry has developed that makes use of "cetacean resources" in the most sustainable way possible: whale watching.

We define whale watching as the observation of any of the 83 species of cetaceans in their natural habitat from any type of platform — small boats, sailboats, cruise ships, inflatables, kayaks, helicopters and airplanes, in-water swimming, as well as from land-based sites. However, as a practical matter, most of our guidelines are directed toward boat-based platforms from which the majority of whale watching is conducted.

The whale watching industry began in California in 1955 and grew steadily up to the mid-1980s. In the late 1980s it began to grow much more rapidly as it spread to Australia, New Zealand, the Canary Islands, Japan and other countries. This dramatic growth has continued throughout the 1990s at 12.1% per year annual growth. Whale watching currently contributes more than US\$1 billion to the annual economies of coastal states around the world.

Whale watching tourism in Japan and Norway (the only currently active whaling countries), has increased by 16.8% and 18.8% per annum respectively from 1994 to 1998. Japan began whale watching in 1988 and now has more than 100,000 mostly Japanese whale watchers a year; even more Japanese go whale watching overseas.

In Norway, whale watching is now a significant tourist attraction with whale watchers spending more than US\$12 million in 1998. The Caribbean region secured an even higher annual increase of 20.2%. On the small Pacific Island of Tonga, whale watching contributes an estimated US\$1 million to the annual economy. Iceland, since 1995, has been the second fastest growing whale watching country in the world, with an average annual increase of 250.9%. The total revenue of whale watching in Iceland is now higher than the estimated annual value of whale hunting before it ended here in the late 1980s.

Whale watching at its best offers many rewards. Besides the socio-economic benefits for coastal communities, it raises ecological awareness

of whales and the marine environment as a whole. It also provides us with invaluable educational benefits, and contributes to scientific research.

Some of the educational benefits include:

- free or cheap school trips for classes to see whales and learn about the sea,
- a chance for graduate students to do field projects and research at sea,
- enhancement of the local community's local knowledge base and fostering its concern about whales, dolphins and the marine environment.

Scientific benefits include:

- free trips for scientists,
- monitoring of the sea and marine environment, and of whale and dolphin populations (seasonal abundance and distribution) by whale watching operators willing to collect basic data and share their logbooks and cruise track records. Because whale watching operators frequently end up spending more time on the sea than scientists, new whale populations and even new species are sometimes found.

These educational and scientific benefits contribute toward creating a local community and customer base that is conversant with cetaceans, their problems and the status of the marine habitat. Thus, for example, when Stellwagen Bank was proposed as a national marine sanctuary in the early 1990s, a support base comprised of millions of people who had seen the whales there made the expensive, time-consuming education process for getting support for the sanctuary unnecessary. Whale watching, in combination with an educated customer base, has made the public information mandate including the educational outreach and other sanctuary programs much easier to implement and allowed them to be more sophisticated in their design. All in all, whale watching has contributed a great deal to education, science and conservation in southern New England.

Besides all these substantial benefits, there are always some costs which lower the value of whale watching. In order to minimise costs, or negative impacts – such as disturbance from noise, excessive traffic, ship strikes and other contributing factors that might alter whale behaviour – it is essential to develop regulations and guidelines in partnership with the whale watching industry.

Greenpeace welcomes the initiative and the efforts made by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to develop such guidelines. But

it also applauds the pioneer initiatives of operators in certain parts of the world to set their own guidelines and to co-operate with regulators and stakeholders in their community to devise workable regulations. Greenpeace recognises that the IWC has a key role in overseeing the further development of sensible guidelines and in reviewing and help improve existing regulations.

The Principles of High-Value, Low-Impact Whale Watching

Greenpeace believes that a priority of whale watching tourism should be to minimise its environmental and ecological impacts, including the impact on the behaviour of cetaceans. This would benefit both the whale watching industry and the ecosystem in the long term.

The following principles should apply:

- a) Whale watching activity must allow cetaceans to continue whatever behaviour they are engaged in at the time of contact. Care should be taken to ensure that they are not disturbed or interrupted in their activities by the approaching vessel.
- b) The goal of whale watching should not be interaction but observation of undisturbed cetacean behaviour. When cetaceans decide to interact with whale watchers, the cetaceans should always remain in control of the situation: that is, they should be free to determine the duration and nature of any interaction.
- c) On a long-term basis, whale watching should not lead to changes in cetacean group behaviour or dynamics, a change in habitat use, or a decline in reproductive success.

Greenpeace believes that the complementary objectives of whale watching tourism should be to make whale watching provide the maximum sustainable socio-economic benefit to a community, the maximum educational, scientific and other values for whale watching tourists while at the same time ensuring the highest return possible to the whales themselves in terms of conservation benefits.

Minimum Rules of Operation

The following minimum guidelines should be established in all regions where whale watching occurs or is in the process of being developed. These minimum rules should be adapted to the local situation and the local species of cetaceans the whale watching operation is targeting. Operators should also adapt the rules to any observed changes in the behaviour of their target cetacean populations.

- a) A security zone should be established around each group of cetaceans. Boats are to be excluded from entering this zone. The size of the security zone should be increased when whales are observed to be disturbed by the whale watching boats. The relevant regulatory authority should ensure that zones are established and adhered to.
- b) Mother and calf pairs should not be approached too closely, except where it has been established that the mother-calf relationship will not be impaired.
- c) The maximum interaction time between tourist operations and groups of cetaceans should be determined locally by the relevant regulatory authority with the operators and should be based on numbers of whale watching boats taking turns to watch as well as the need for the whales to have time to themselves.
- d) The regulatory authority should work with the operators to establish the appropriate angle to approach the cetaceans, which will depend on the species and group size.
- e) Boats must generally reduce speed and avoid any rapid changes in speed or direction when in the vicinity of whales. Maximum vessel speed should be agreed between the operators and the regulatory authority.
- f) Noise onboard the vessel should be minimised especially when cetaceans are close.
- g) Groups of cetaceans should never be split up by a boat or encircled by several boats.
- h) A vessel should never pursue cetaceans when they leave an area.
- i) No new 'swim with' programs should begin before the IWC has finished establishing its guidelines.

- j) Cetacean feeding programs have led to reduced reproductive success in dolphins and should be discontinued completely.
- k) Regulatory authorities, particularly in popular whale watching areas, should consider designating cetacean rest areas where no whale watching occurs, or impose periodic “time outs” to give target populations a break from whale watching boats.
- l) Wherever possible communities/stakeholders should be encouraged to develop a land-based whale watching component with educational display materials. This will allow people who will not take boat trips to see and learn about the whales. It also provides a valuable orientation and educational platform for all potential and existing whale watchers at little or no cost to the whales and the environment. Land-based whale watching is currently providing a valuable socio-economic contribution in Hermanus, South Africa; Québec, Canada; Ogasawara, Japan; and throughout California, Oregon and Washington State, USA.

These minimum rules should be established in close co-operation with the IWC. The following points should also be taken into consideration when establishing new operations or reviewing existing operations:

- i. Before issuing permits, a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) should be undertaken by the relevant regulatory authority to establish the ecological sustainability of the whale watching operation – both with regard to the target cetacean populations and the wider environment.
- ii. Only operators who meet the relevant regulatory authority's requirements should be issued with a permit.
- iii. Regulations must be enforced by the permitting authority.

Research and Education

Greenpeace recommends the following research and educational requirements:

- a) Every operation should have a trained naturalist or guide. In boats with fewer than 10-15 passengers where carrying a separate naturalist is impossible, then the boat operator must be able to assume these duties. A separate dedicated naturalist is preferable, and boats with large capacity should carry more than one naturalist.

- b) All operators and naturalists must undertake basic training in the biology and ecology of the species observed and be able to provide accurate background information on the ecosystem and other species to their customers.
- c) Co-operative relationships between the industry and scientists should be encouraged, in order to improve knowledge of target populations and effectively monitor impacts on target species.

Conclusion

These guidelines are based on current scientific knowledge of whales and their biology, primarily as advanced by the Scientific Committee of the IWC. New information will be evaluated periodically and the guidelines should be adapted to reflect this new information. Any coastal state seeking to develop its whale watching industry should incorporate the ongoing work of the IWC in the establishment and review of industry regulations.

Several coastal states, such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain and Tonga, have established legally binding rules for whale watching that incorporate all or most of the above mentioned minimal guidelines.

Greenpeace calls on all countries or overseas regions where whale watching is occurring or in the process of being established, to collaborate with operators and other stakeholders in local communities to develop clear and consistent policy and management procedures, to implement legally binding rules and to enforce these rules.

Greenpeace recognises that the most successful management, regulation, and enforcement regimes are developed through the involvement of all stakeholders in a whale watching community and are subject to periodic revision and fine tuning.

Greenpeace welcomes the IWC's wish, as stated in IWC resolution 1996-2, to encourage the development of whale watching as a sustainable, non-lethal cetacean industry. It is entirely consistent with the preamble for the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling which states:

"...recognizing the interest of the nations of the world in safeguarding for future generations the great natural resources represented by the whale stocks; considering that the history of whaling has seen over-fishing of one area after another and of one species of whale after another to such a degree that it is essential to protect all species of whales from further over-fishing".

In this respect, Greenpeace encourages the IWC to increase and concentrate its efforts to develop safe guidelines to achieve the optimum level of whale watching without causing ecological distress to cetaceans or the wider environment.

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