

A whale of a time

Whale watching is big business. Last year, 13 million people went on a whale-watching trip, spending more than US\$2billion. But what effect is the incredible growth of the industry having on the whales themselves? asks **Richard Hammond**

Sitting in a boat within belly-flop distance of a 40-tonne animal is what whale watching is all about. If you're lucky, you may see one breach, flip its tail fluke over in a sweeping arc, and slap it back down with a crashing thump. It's a mesmerising sight, and one that has become one of the must-do nature-watching experiences.

And whale watching is now big business. According to a report published last year by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the roots of commercial whale watching, which it defines as viewing all cetacean species, including whales, dolphins and porpoises, can be traced back to the southern California coast in 1955. Since then, the number of whale watchers worldwide has grown remarkably – to four million by 1991, nine million in 1998, and last year, a whopping 13 million people went on a whale-watching trip, spending US\$2.1billion in 119 countries, with growth highest in Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and South America. Worldwide, there are some 3,300 whale-watching operators.

In some of the most popular places, whale watching is a core component of the country's overall income from tourism. One in every eight visitors to Iceland goes whale watching, a busi-

ness that annually attracts more than 100,000 people and is now worth nearly US\$17million a year.

ENORMOUS POPULARITY

However, whale watching's enormous popularity has led to concerns over the welfare of these magnificent creatures, not least because nearly a quarter of all whale and dolphin species are in the 'threatened' species category of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List. The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCCS) reports that recent findings offer a 'cautionary tale' about the effect that whale watching can have on the animal's physical condition, reproductive rates, distribution and habitat.

Vanessa Williams-Grey, manager of the responsible-whale-watching programme at the WDCCS, says: 'The most serious problems exist in areas where vessel density is highest; or where a small or vulnerable cetacean population is repeatedly targeted by multiple vessels; or where the geography of the area means that the targeted cetacean population – usually a coastal or near-shore species – is literally fenced in by a small bay or cove and thus can't escape unwanted vessel attention.'

An example of this kind of pressure can be seen in Washington state, USA,

where there's a resident orca population. It numbers only 88, yet during the high season, according to Williams-Grey, as many as 126 vessels trail the animals for up to 12 hours at a time. 'Recent research specific to the southern resident orcas has shown that vessel presence causes these animals to adopt more erratic swimming paths and reduces the time they spend feeding,' she says.

Similarly, a study of bottlenose dolphins living off the coast of Zanzibar published in March in *Endangered Species Research* reported that 'the many tourist boats operating in the area are harassing the animals, preventing them from resting, feeding and nurturing their young. Overall, the dolphins are using more energy than they are taking in because they aren't resting or feeding as much but are swimming more as they try to avoid the tourist boats.'

'The current situation in Zanzibar is unsustainable,' says Dr Per Berggren of Newcastle University, who led the study. 'The local community is dependent on tourism – and therefore the dolphins – but unless the activity is regulated, the animals will leave.'

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

So how can you go whale watching responsibly? 'I would recommend anyone who is going on a whale-watching holiday anywhere in the world does their homework first,' says Colin Steedie, a former whale-watching skipper and now director of Wildlife Safe – a UK-based training and accreditation scheme for marine operators. 'First, you should look for countries where whale watching is at least well regulated. And second, you should look for trips where there is

a resident naturalist on board – which you’ll find in countries such as Iceland, New Zealand and the USA – because it implies a commitment towards passing on knowledge that is worth quite a lot to research organisations.’

Unfortunately, there is no international regulation for whale watching, although Williams-Grey says that in some areas, there are voluntary codes of conduct as well as operator training and accreditation schemes, such as the Dolphin Space Programme in Scotland’s Moray Firth, Dolphin SMART in the Florida area, and a sister programme, Whale SENSE, in New England.

The WDCS is currently campaigning for adequate monitoring and enforcement provisions in each whale-watching region, and has drawn up a list of criteria that it believes should be adhered to, including minimum approach distances; stipulations on speed, angle of approach and how long the vessel may

spend in the vicinity of whales; and specific advice relating to whether vessels may approach females with calves; as well as offering licences to a limited number of vessels in line with the optimum ‘carrying capacity’ of the region. The WDCS also recommends a ‘one third rule’, whereby one third of every whale-watching area, and one third of daylight hours, should be kept free of whale-watching activity. Williams-Grey says that this is a rule of thumb, ‘but the aim is to give the animals much needed “time out” from vessel presence’.

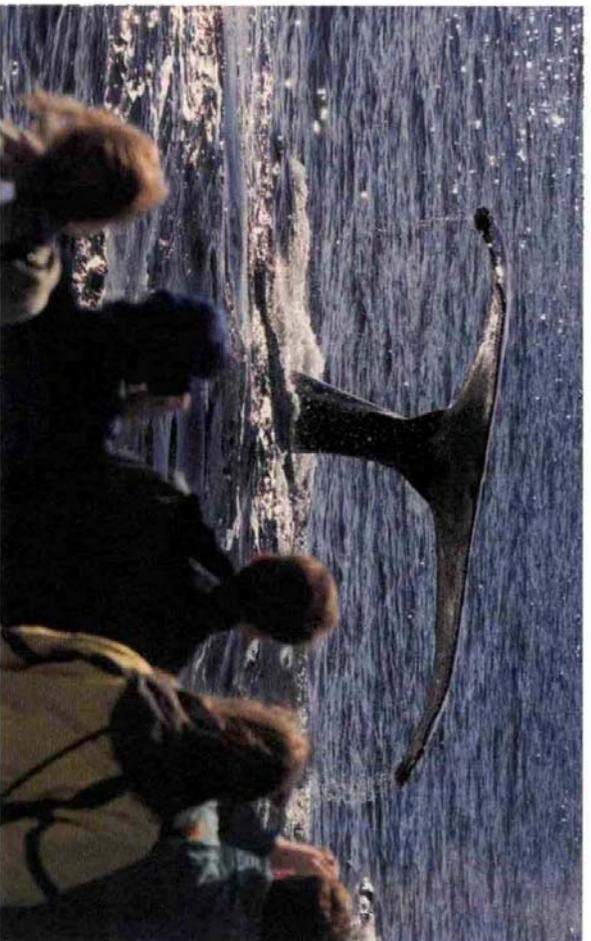
Although the WDCS is campaigning for better regulation, it remains committed to encouraging whale watching because of the valuable contribution it makes to conservation. In a 2008 study, it found that ‘increased empathy and support for whales can result from encountering whales in the wild in tandem with onboard educational commentary from a trained naturalist guide.

Many people report that the experience of viewing whales and dolphins in the wild is invigorating, awe-inspiring – even life-changing.’

It’s a sentiment with which the IFAW report agrees, concluding that ‘with its educational, scientific and community-based economic benefits, [whale watching] remains largely a positive force for conservation. People must come to know the animals if they are truly to care for them and about them. An economic incentive helps make that happen.’ **G**

— RICHARD HAMMOND —
is the co-author of *Clean Breaks: 500 New Ways to See the World* (£18.99, Rough Guides)





SAVE THE WHALE FIVE RESPONSIBLE WHALE-WATCHING HOLIDAYS



1 West Cork, Ireland

Get up close to minke whales (May–Dec), fin whales (Jun–Jan) and humpback whales (Aug–Jan) with local tour guide Nic Slocum on his boat tours off the west coast of Ireland, which are operated under the guidelines of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.
www.whalewatchwestcork.com, +353 86 120 0027



2 Moray Firth, Scotland

See the world's most northerly colony of bottlenose dolphins (one of only two UK-resident populations) from a high-speed RIB with EcoVentures – an operator accredited with both the Wise Scheme and the Dolphin Space Programme. From May to September, you may also see minke whales.
www.ecoventures.co.uk, 01381 600 323



3 Andalucía, Spain

Join a Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society-endorsed trip to see resident populations of pilot whales, common dolphins, striped dolphins and bottlenose dolphins in the Straits of Gibraltar. With luck, you may also see orcas competing with fishermen for bluefin tuna.
www.oceansworldwide.co.uk, 0845 290 3218



4 Quebec, Canada

See up to 13 whale species in the estuary and gulf of the St Lawrence River, where operators have to apply for a permit for responsible whale watching and provide knowledgeable guides who can offer insights into the whale's behaviour and the ecology of the surrounding region.
www.quebecdventure.ca



5 Kaitioura, New Zealand

Responsible operator Whale Watch Kaitioura has a 95 per cent success rate for visitors seeing a whale in this world-famous whale-watching region off the east coast of the South Island. Species include migrating humpback whales, pilot whales, blue whales, southern right whales and the giant sperm whale.
www.whalewatch.co.nz