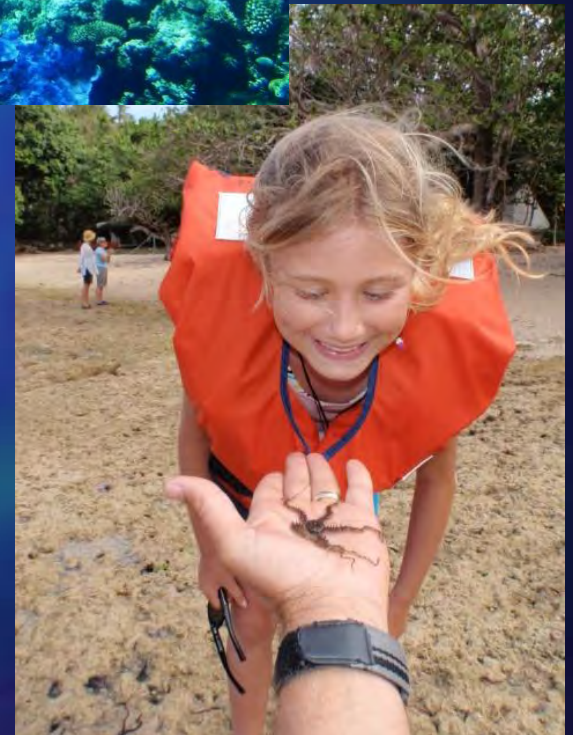


The value of whales as a tourism attraction in the Kingdom of Tonga



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Characteristics of Whale Tourism in Tonga

- Seasonal (July to September).
- Humpback whale focused.
- Swim (snorkel) with opportunities major draw-card.
- Clear, warm water – but wind and sea state can be challenging.
- Mother – calf pair focus.
- Has expanded from Vava'u to Ha'apai, Eua and Tongatapu

Economic Valuation of Natural Resources

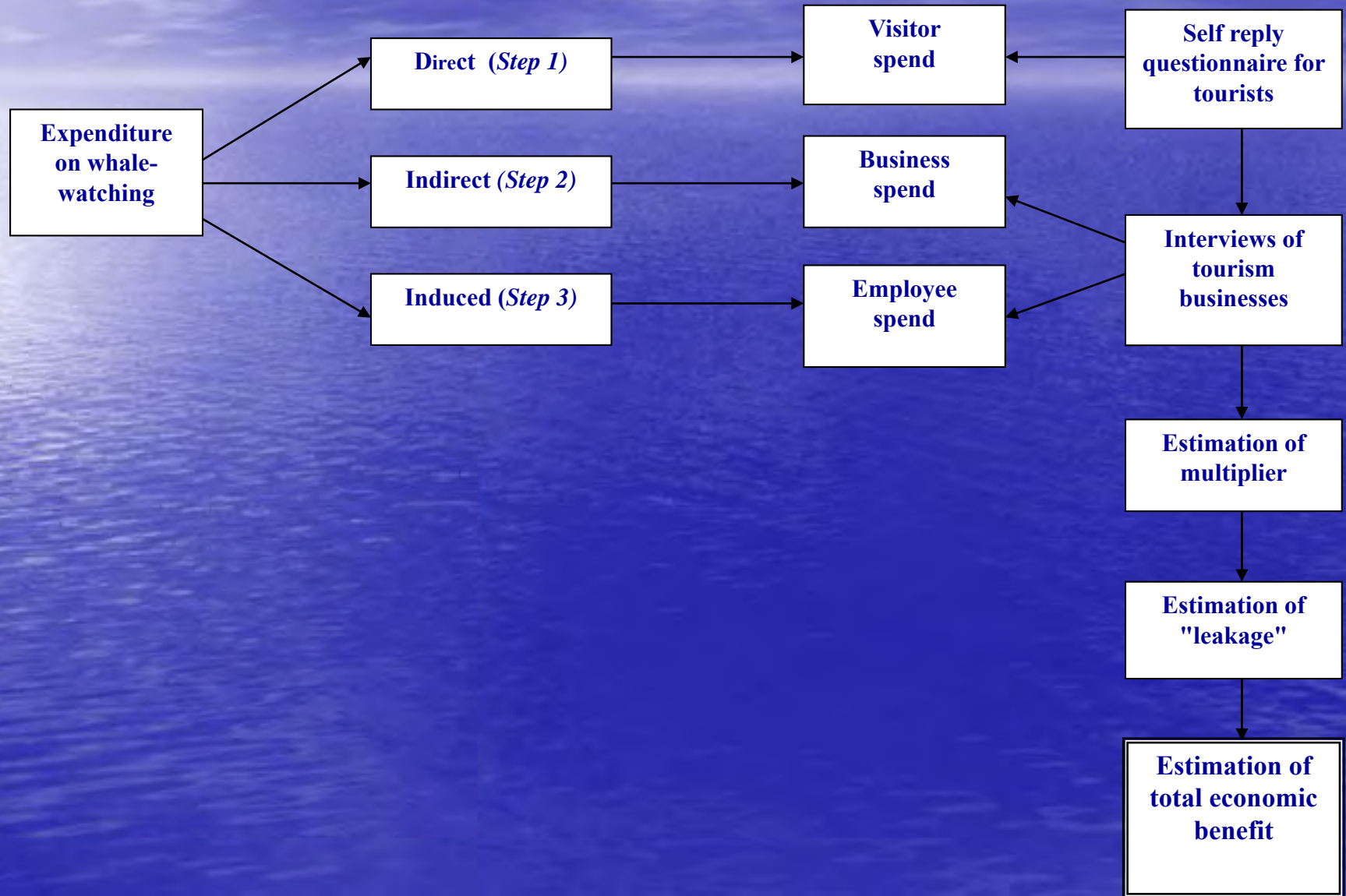
- Valuation: Benefits and costs, tangible and intangible.
- Expenditure (revenue), leakage, existence, option and bequest values.
- Direct, indirect and induced expenditure.
- Other challenges in valuing natural resources.

Studies completed into value of whale-based tourism in **Vava'u**: 1999 and 2009

Data collection methods

- 1. Self-reply questionnaire of holiday-makers travelling via aircraft.**
- 2. Self-reply questionnaire of holiday-makers travelling via boat.**
- 3. Face to face interviews with licensed whale-watching business operators.**

Economic benefits of whale-watching model used in this study



Study Findings

Comparison of economic benefit of whale-**watching estimates for Vava'u in 1999 and 2009** (all figures in United States dollars per season).

	Direct Expenditure of Visitors on Whale- watching	Other Expenditure of Whale Tourists	Whale- watch Operators Expenditure in Vava'u	Whale- watch Business Employees Expenditure in Vava'u	TOTAL
Estimated totals for all permitted whale-watch operators in 1999	\$50,000 to \$74,240	\$364,800	\$30,080	\$28,160	\$473,030 to \$497,280
Estimated totals for all permitted whale-watch operators in 2009	\$600,000	\$4,069,169	\$300,629	\$209,671	\$5,170,469

Notes: Totals are rounded to nearest dollar.

Other Important Findings

- Whales have become the predominant tourism attraction in Vava'u.
1999: 22% of aircraft-based visitors & 8% of yacht-based visitors.
2009: 42% of aircraft-based visitors & 25% of yacht-based visitors.
- Predominance of swim-with-whales.
- Compressed the peak tourism season.
- Increasing misunderstanding and conflict.
- Increasing concern regarding the potential negative impacts on whales.
- Tension regarding licenses and management.
- Disagreement on commercial whale-watching activities on Sundays.
- Low numbers of local Tongan owners and low level of involvement from locals.

Implications

- 1. There is increasing evidence from elsewhere that whale-watching can tip into a decline after a strong period of growth (eg. Hervey Bay, Queensland, Australia).**
- 2. Competition exists from not only other whale-watching destinations but also from other marine wildlife interaction opportunities.**
- 3. The growth in ethical influences on travel and activity choices continues, especially with mature western source countries (eg. Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand, UK, Western European and Scandinavian countries).**

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT)

Strengths

- Established whale-watching industry and good “visibility” in some source markets (eg. New Zealand).
- Climate (air and water temperature).
- Water clarity and quality (open water areas).
- Humpback whales (numbers, ‘charisma’, breeding season).
- Swim-with opportunities (and photography/videography).
- Strong growth in outbound tourism from countries in Asia-Pacific region (eg. China, India)
- Close proximity to strong growing inbound tourism markets (New Zealand and east coast Australia).
- Experience and support for whale conservation.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT)

Weaknesses

- High seasonality = very compressed season (July-Sept).
- Remoteness and access (cost, time, reliability).
- Inflated cost of participation (including high exchange rate).
- Continued questions/concerns about ethics of operations, management regime and negative effects on whales.
- Quality, reliability and safety of infrastructure supporting tourism (eg. aircraft, vessels, accommodation).
- High turn-over of operators, staff.
- Variable quality of experience offered.
- Operators dominated by Palangis.
- Leakage of economic benefits.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT)

Opportunities

- **Transition to world-leading ecotourism destination with ethical whale-watching practices.**
- **Growth in whale numbers.**
- **Build pride, social and economic benefits from industry.**
- **Quality of experience over quantity of customers.**
- **Leadership in whale and marine conservation.**
- **Value add to whale-tourism “product” (eg. Souvenirs, photography/videography, festival/s, event/s, citizen science, voluntourism, museum/visitor centre, education tourism ...).**
- **Extend season through attraction switching (eg. Sea-turtles, sea-birds, rays/sharks, coral reef attractions ...)**

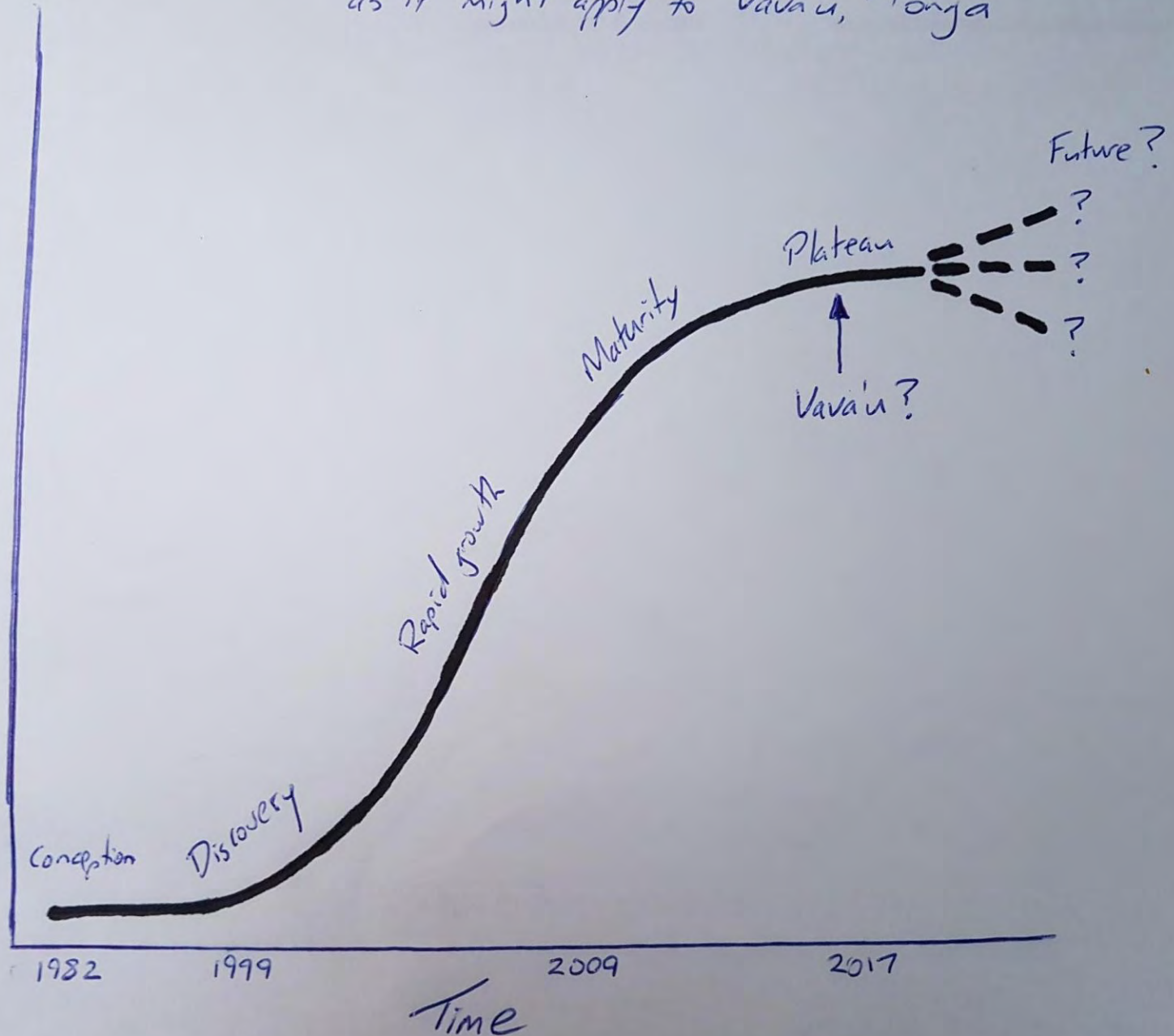
Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT)

Threats

- **Whale population decline (and/or destination switching).**
- **Reputation.**
- **Infrastructure failure.**
- **Cyclone/s and related damage, costs and image.**
- **Competition.**
- **Exchange rate and economic competitiveness.**
- **Accidents (especially fatalities).**
- **World economy, security.**
- **Climate change and related issues.**
- **Environmental degradation and decreased quality of experience.**
- **Corruption, greed and lack of integrity.**

A consideration of the Destination Life-cycle as it might apply to Vava'u, Tonga

Tourism
growth



The Future?

- 1. Evidence from elsewhere shows that whale-based tourism will not grow indefinitely.**
- 2. Remote locations are vulnerable to alternate destinations that are more easily accessible and more affordable.**
- 3. Impacts and a destination's reputation regarding careful management of impacts is an important influence on patronage.**
- 4. Financial viability, conflict and tension is often a challenge for the industry.**
- 5. Management regimes can be effective if carefully designed, developed in partnership with industry and effectively implemented (including policing).**
- 6. Tonga as a whale watching destination is at an important transition point.**



“He waka eke noa”
(We are all paddling in the same canoe)