The Global Status and True Value of Whale Watching:

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Whales in a Changing Ocean Conference
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2009 IFAW report on whale watching: Key Findings

- Nearly 13 million people are going whale watching per year (as of 2017: >15 million?)
- WWs are spending > $2.1 billion USD
- 13,000 jobs supported worldwide
- Whale watching has been described as “an industry that provides a new model for use of natural resources, an industry that relies on whales in a non-extractive way that when well-managed can be truly sustainable.” It’s not really “new” anymore.
- In some areas whale watching continues to show strong growth against overall tourism: Iceland, for example. In other areas it is mature or declining.
Global Whale watching by region

- About 17% of whale watching worldwide occurs in the Pacific islands.
- Most whale watching happens in North America (48%) with 38% in the USA alone.
- Fastest growing whale watching may be Iceland 20% avg annual growth rate per year.

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Recent book that takes the current temperature of whale watching in all its dimensions.

Whale watching in many areas is being criticized for various reasons: The impact on whales & dolphins; tourism footprint (traffic, strain on services & infrastructure, litter); unpredictable nature, seasonality of the business.

Growing scientific proof that (particularly) small odontocetes are impacted by whale watching.

Concern about large whales and whale watching, that the short-term reactions may translate to long-term impacts.
Trends in Whale Watching

• Trend 1: Whale watching in established areas is becoming more diverse (there are new ways to go whale watching). Yet at the same time whale watching is becoming more competitive.

• Trend 2: The numbers of boats & people on the water have put some populations in danger & diminished the tourist experience.

• Trend 3: Whale watching tourists want closer & closer encounters with whales, & operators are advertising & feel they need to offer closer & closer encounters.
Trends in Whale Watching

& ideas for how to respond

- Trend 1: Whale watching in established areas is becoming more diverse (there are new ways to go whale watching). Yet at the same time whale watching is becoming more competitive.

  *Embrace diversity; be creative*

- Trend 2: The numbers of boats & people on the water have put some populations in danger & diminished the tourist experience.

  *MPAs & sanctuaries have whale watching but whales also need sanctuaries from whale watching*

- Trend 3: Whale watching tourists want closer and closer encounters with whales, and operators are advertising and feel they need to offer closer and closer encounters.

  *Change tourist expectations*
Trend 1: Whale watching in established areas is becoming more diverse

WW is:

- WW Boat - Whales
- WW Boat - Dolphins
- Kayak
- Inflatable (RIB)
- General Nature Tour
- Land-based
- WW from Air

But WW is also:

- WW / Marine Wildlife Centres, WW Festivals, Whale Trails and WW Special Events

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Trend 1: Whale watching in established areas is becoming more diverse

Positive aspects:
• Spreads the impact across many more species and areas, etc.
• Offers more chances to attract a wider range of tourists
• Provides more employment
• This makes things more competitive.
• Emphasis on reducing risk…

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Trend 1: Whale watching in established areas is becoming more diverse

Negative aspects:
• Tourists compare & book whale watching with more than 1,000 operators in 100+ countries. They can easily select one country over another & choose birding, shark, nature cruises & treks.

—> Getting the competitive edge: e.g., develop more tourist options (tour products), put more value into the trips (good guides, slow whale watching, enhanced customer care).

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Powerful Whale Watching “Brands”

- Gray Whale Lagoons of Mexico: El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve
- Sanctuary of the Dominican Republic
- Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary
- Robson Bight Ecological Reserve for killer whales
- The Whales of Iceland

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EEZ sanctuaries for whales and dolphins in the Pacific...are “brands”
Overview of Pacific Marine Biodiversity & Work Toward Protection...more branding possibilities
Trend 2: The numbers of boats & people on the water have put some species in danger & diminished tourist experience

Problem areas:

• Doubtful Sound, NZ documented harm to bottlenose dolphins
• Puget Sound-Salish Sea southern community orcas: > 100 whale watching boats
• Anywhere with congested boat traffic

├› Need to determine K for whale watching with permit system
├› Develop more land-based whale watching, other ecotourism (multiple species and ecosystems and land and water) to spread the impact
├› One third time & space rules; zoned MPAs for management & branding
Compounding issues around whale watching boat traffic:

- Recreational boats, container ship traffic, yacht races
- Overfishing and bycatch: 300,000+ whales and dolphins caught in nets accidentally every year – bycatch
- Military sonar exercises & seismic surveys for oil / gas exploration deafens whales & dolphins
- Threat of oil spills and other pollution

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Trend 3: Whale watching tourists want closer & closer encounters with whales, & operators are advertising & feel they need to offer “encounters”

Problems:
• too much contact with humans does not have survival value for most wild animals (approach too close to whalers, fishers with guns, etc.)
• are we hugging the whales too much?
* even if you don’t approach close to whales, they come close to you

—> Customer care and education is part of the answer.
—> Researchers or experienced naturalist guides can help interpret behavior to ensure WW boats are not encroaching on the whales; they can also help reset passenger expectations about closeness.
—> Get back to ethic of watching natural behavior without disturbing it.
Conclusion: Road to high quality & responsible tourism never ends

Potential ideas for responsible, sustainable whale watching:

- Good naturalist guides and educational programmes
- Establish K carrying capacity and limits to growth with permit system
- Diversify/ Experiment with new WW Tour products & income streams (B&B, café, whale centre, lookouts, to spread the impact on whales, enrich the experience and provide alternative activities.
- Monitoring + internal / external evaluations and periodic re-evaluations
- Every few years, whale watch operators, tourism managers and community stakeholders should re-dedicate their energy and passion, fine-tune or re-invent their company mission and look at practices
- Make a Benefit Cost analysis to increase benefits and reduce costs.
Toward Sustainable Whale Watching: Cost-benefit scenario & economic valuation

BENEFITS: educational, scientific, conservation, financial, recreational & other values

COSTS: disturbance to whales & marine/land areas, injuries to whales

- Cost of education, research, management, enforcement
- Cost of opportunities foregone: fishing, gas/oil/mineral exploitation, military use, reduced shipping lanes & speeds
- Naturalist Guide acting as and interpreter and bridge from whales and the ocean to the tourist
- Income for WW companies & community
- Whales can give powerful branding and community pride and revitalisation (Kaikoura example)

How can we reduce costs & increase benefits?
WHERE do we want to be in 5 years? It is not enough to show whales to people and make some money. Whale watching operators, guides and communities have a mission to educate and connect people to the ocean in a way that is beneficial for whales, too.