

Wondering about the Economic Impact of Ecotourism on Marine Mammals? Read Here...

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FIG. 1 A CRITICALLY ENDANGERED BLUE WHALE OFF MY RESEARCH STUDY AREA OF SANTA MONICA BAY, CALIFORNIA. IN RECENT YEARS, BLUE WHALES AND OTHER ENDANGERED AND THREATENED CETACEAN SPECIES HAVE BEEN FREQUENTLY OBSERVED OFF LOS ANGELES DURING THE SUMMERTIME. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MADDALENA BEARZI /OCEAN CONSERVATION SOCIETY.

Marine tourism is now considered a “new frontier of late-capitalist transformation”, producing more revenue than aquaculture and fisheries put together. For many coastal communities, this industry is becoming the most significant economic activity.

Marine tourism spans from simple operations run by one or few people (charter fishing boat operators, sea kayak tour guides, scuba diving instructors, etc.) to medium-size operations (marine-nature-watching boats, charter-yacht companies, etc.) and large operations (e.g., cruise ship companies).

As part of this large industry, marine mammal-based ecotourism, especially whale-watching (while not all cetaceans are whales, cetacean-watching trips are often referred to as “whale-watching”) has risen as a novel form of commercial and non-consumptive (nonlethal) wildlife activity. Other forms of this kind of “green” tourism involving marine mammals comprise, among others, swim-with-wild-dolphin programs (occasionally combined with whale-watching tours), dolphin provisional feeding programs, watching polar bears, or visiting pinniped rookeries.

The rapid growth of this business is linked to the broad appeal that these charismatic and large animals have on many people and to coastal habitats that make some of them readily accessible. Nearly half of the human population on our planet lives near water and uses the oceans as recreational playgrounds on a regular basis.

Whale-watching, the pillar of marine mammal-based ecotourism and currently the greatest economic activity reliant upon cetaceans, is not a new thing, as it has been ongoing as a commercial endeavor for more than 60 years. Its origin seems to coincide with a whale-watching trip that took place off California back in 1955. Here, a solo entrepreneur charged \$1 a person for a ride on his fishing boat to observe migratory gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*).

FIG. 2 GRAY WHALE TRAVELING NEAR SHORE DURING THEIR MIGRATION FROM ALASKA TO BAJA CALIFORNIA. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MADDALENA BEARZI /OCEAN CONSERVATION SOCIETY.

Based on the definition of the International Whaling Commission, whale-watching represents “*any commercial enterprise which provides for the public to see cetaceans in their natural habitat.*” Whale-watching, although mostly conducted aboard boats, also includes land-based or even aerial observations. In 2005, the IWC corrected the definition to include not only commercial businesses but also the public going to sea with their own vessels to observe cetaceans and/or research trips with paying guests.

In the last two decades, this marine tourism has increased substantially, becoming a worldwide profitable industry and affecting many nearshore populations of cetaceans. Since the 1990s, the number of people participating in boat-based whale-watching worldwide has expanded considerably, from 4 million in 31 countries in 1991 to 13 million in 119 countries in 2008.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare estimated the value of this business at \$2.1 billion back in 2008. Recently, the development of this eco-business has been increasing exponentially in Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America.

Swim-with-wild-dolphin programs, considered a subset of the whale-watching industry, are also operated in different parts of the world, becoming exceptionally popular in the Caribbean. These types of programs are considered *active* or *passive*, depending on whether humans are interacting with cetaceans (usually dolphins) or cetaceans are allowed to approach swimmers of their own will. Another subset of whale-watching includes marine mammal “provisioning” activities, which usually involve feeding wild dolphins in shallow waters. Monkey Mia, in Australia, is one of the most popular spots for this type of tourism.

Cetaceans are not the only marine mammals affected by tourism. Weighing up to 1,200 pounds, manatees (*Trichechus* sp.) have been the focus of ecotourism and swim-with programs for several decades. The Crystal River Refuge in Florida, for instance, is a drawcard for people looking to swim with or kayak near these animals, hosting more than 327,000 visitors in 2014.

Pinnipeds also appeal to tourists due to their behavioral traits that make them easily accessible by boat and/or on foot. Often, whale-watching trips include some type of “pinniped viewing” in their on-the-water tours. Watching seals, sea lions, and other pinnipeds has become more popular in the last couple of decades, involving a wide range of species in various locations worldwide.

FIG. 3 “PINNIPED VIEWING” IS QUITE POPULAR BECAUSE SPECIES SUCH AS ELEPHANT SEALS AND SEA LIONS ARE EASILY ACCESSIBLE BY BOAT AND/OR ON FOOT. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MADDALENA BEARZI /OCEAN CONSERVATION SOCIETY.

A study conducted by Kirkwood and other authors reported approximately 80 pinniped tourism sites in the Southern Hemisphere alone, with an economic value of around U.S. \$12 million; the Australian component included 53 operators visiting 23 sites and involving around 400,000 tourists. Pinnipeds also attract tourism in several locations in North America, the Galápagos Islands, and Europe.

An important breeding site in North America is located on San Miguel Island, in the Channel Islands National Park and Marine Sanctuary, California. Here, there are approximately 70,000 California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*), 50,000 northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*), 5,000 northern fur seals (*Callorhinus ursinus*), and 1,000 harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*). In 2012, about 265,000 tourists visited these islands. Usually, seals and sea lions are observed at their breeding colonies and/or at the haul-out sites, but some pinnipeds—such as sea lions—can also be observed near urban centers.

Even the cold polar regions are not immune to the masses brought by marine mammal-based tourism. Visitors in the Arctic now exceed the host population at several destinations, and local communities are increasingly dependent on the jobs, income, and business revenues generated by this type of tourism.

On the opposite pole, things are not much different. Tourism in Antarctica has expanded greatly in the last decades, with shipborne tourists increasing by 430% in 14 years and land-based tourists by 757% in 10 years.

Going out to sea to observe dolphins, whales, and other marine mammals has gained even more momentum in the last few years, due to the crisis in the captivity industry. Anti-captivity campaigns and documentaries such as *The Cove* and *Blackfish* have helped to raise public awareness about the status of dolphins and whales kept in tanks. Inside academic circles, scientists have begun to recognize these animals as cognitive beings with personalities and emotions. As a result of this deepening “animal-human bond,” the number of people feeling empathy and compassion toward these and other animals is growing and so has the interest in experiencing wildlife away from bars or glass. Whale-watching, either boat-based from land or atop a paddleboard, seems the obvious and right alternative to visiting animals in captivity.

SURFER AND BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS OFF LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MADDALENA BEARZI /OCEAN CONSERVATION SOCIETY.

The benefits of marine mammal-based ecotourism span from a better appreciation of the marine environment to bolstering local economies, particularly in developing countries in which ecotourism represents an alternative way of “using” natural resources.

For animal lovers, whale-watching and other types of marine mammal viewing in natural habitats are an incredible and often once-in-a-lifetime experience. For conservationists, it’s a chance of educating the public, raising awareness and interest in conservation issues facing cetaceans and other marine mammals, finding

sustainable alternatives to fishing, and ending captivity in marine parks. For instance, in places like Japan, where the whaling industry still seems unstoppable, whale-watching could represent a lucrative alternative to the hunting of cetaceans and a response to the country's recent cultural shifts.

Marine mammal-based tourism, if conducted properly and on a sustainable basis (for information about mitigating negative impacts on marine mammals read chapter 6 of [Ecotourism's Promise and Peril: A Biological Evaluation](#)), is a "benign" industry. Ecotourism done right cannot only work, but it can work well. Marine mammals' welfare should, however, remain the main objective of this industry because, without these animals, there will be no ecotourism at all.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 6 entitled Impacts of Marine Mammal Tourism, originally written by the author of this post for the recently published book [Ecotourism's Promise and Peril: A Biological Evaluation](#) (Blumstein, D.T., Geffroy, B., Samia, D.S.M., Bessa, E., Eds.; Springer, 2017). In addition to covering the economic impact of ecotourism on marine mammals, the chapter offers a biological evaluation of ecotourism impacts on marine mammals, as well as positive impacts, what we still don't know, and how mitigate negative impacts. Information and data reported in this article are fully cited at the end of the above-mentioned chapter.

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