



Whale watching in Sri Lanka: Perceptions of sustainability



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ABSTRACT

Whale watching creates an economic value for whales beyond consumption and therefore assists in the conservation of the species. However sustainable management is needed to avoid deleterious impacts on the whales and the industry. This paper uses a range of qualitative methods to examine the characteristics, management and perceived sustainability of the relatively newly established whale watching industry in Sri Lanka. It is clear that the laissez faire development of the industry has resulted in some poor conservation outcomes for the whales as well as variable tourist experiences. The Sri Lankan government has introduced legislated regulations aimed at managing the industry however it must ensure adequate human and financial resources are provided to ensure the effective implementation of the regulations and therefore the sustainability of the industry.

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1. Introduction

Wildlife tourism, of which whale watching is an important component, is seen as a way to promote the conservation of various species through raising tourist awareness on conservation issues and by generating economic benefits (Mustika, Birtles, Welters, & Marsh, 2012; Tisdell & Wilson, 2001). Whale watching, since its beginnings in the mid-1960s, has grown into a global industry that provides substantial economic benefits to over 70 countries that provide viewing opportunities (O'Connor, Campbell, Cortez, & Knowles, 2009). These opportunities, by promoting conservation, can assist in ameliorating the impacts of commercial whaling that resulted in the decline of many whale populations (Cisneros-Montemayor, Sumaila, Kaschner, & Pauly, 2010).

While the growth of the industry has provided many conservation and economic benefits there are also concerns that the poor management of tourism may be resulting in negative impacts on whales including changes in vocalisation and respiration patterns, surfacing and swimming behaviour, feeding times and group size (Higham, Bejder, & Lusseau, 2009; Parsons, 2012). These negative impacts not only have a detrimental impact on whale populations they also threaten the sustainability of the industry. In order to address these negative impacts (as well as improve visitor satisfaction and safety) a number of destinations have introduced guidelines and/or codes of conducts aimed at ensuring the sustainable management of the industry (Cole, 2007; Garrod & Fennell, 2004; Parsons, 2012).

Effective guidelines and management strategies are important since they help ensure that tourism development does not result in negative

environmental outcomes, loss of amenity, reduced demand for the tourism product and reduced economic benefits accruing to local communities (Parsons, 2012). However, Cressey (2014) asserts that guidelines are often inadequate. In addition, the adoption of unsustainable practices has often been encouraged because of the political and economic pressure to attain short-term benefits from tourism at the expense of delayed environmental impacts (Buultjens, Ratnayake, Gnanapala, & Aslam, 2005).

Sri Lanka is a developing country that has recently experienced a relatively rapid development in its whale watching industry. Since 2008, numbers have increased from an estimated 620 tour participants (O'Connor et al., 2009) to nearly 80,000 in 2014 (Coast guard representative 15, personal communication). The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the development and characteristics of the industry, its management as well as stakeholder and visitor perceptions of the industry's sustainability. This study has a particular focus on the industry situated in Mirissa due to the low level of development in the two other whale watching sites located in Trincomalee and Kalpitiya. This study is important since empirical research on whale watching is critical if the growth and carrying capacity of the whale-watching industry are to be understood properly (Higham et al., 2009). This is especially true for a country like Sri Lanka where the tourism industry is expanding rapidly and whale watching is in its infancy. Hopefully the findings discussed in this paper will provide valuable insights that can contribute positively towards the management of whale watching tourism in the country.

This paper begins by presenting an overview of whale watching and effective management regimes adopted at different locations around the world. This is followed by a description of the Sri Lankan tourism industry. The next section provides a description of the methodology used in this study followed by a description of the whale watching industry

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and the perceived tourism impacts associated with its development. This is followed by a discussion and the conclusion to the paper.

2. Whale watching

Wildlife tourism, including whale watching, is a specialised and highly important component of the tourism industry (Higginbottom, 2004). It can involve encounters with non-domesticated (non-human) animals in either a natural environment or in captivity (Higginbottom, 2004). Properly managed wildlife tourism, by creating economic value, provides an incentive for the protection of wildlife and the environment. It can also enhance a destination's appeal and visitor experience (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011). The failure to provide effective sustainable management can potentially result in serious problems to arise including the injury or death of wildlife, habitat alteration and the modification of natural behaviour (Banerjee, 2012).

Whale watching, a sub-category of wildlife tourism, is defined as "tours by boat, air or from land, formal or informal, with at least some commercial aspect, to see, swim with, and/or listen to any of the ... species of whales, dolphins and porpoises" (Hoyt, 2001: p. 3). It began in Massachusetts in the 1960s and has since grown into a substantial global industry. The value of whale watching is multi-fold. Firstly, it creates an economic value for whales beyond consumption through injecting tourism revenue into local economies. Secondly, whale watching is valued for its contribution to environmental education and scientific research (Lambert, Hunter, Pierce, & MacLeod, 2010). It also assists in changing peoples' perspectives on the use of whales for tourism opportunities rather than for food. The change in perspective of usefulness in anthropocentric terms is considered crucial to whale species' long term recovery. This is especially important since most whale species worldwide have been recovering from the brink of extinction since 1986 when the International Whaling Commission declared a 10 year moratorium on whaling (Chen, 2011).

The substantial economic benefits from whale watching can play an important role in assisting in the recovery of the species. For example, in 1998 the industry was estimated to generate over US\$1 billion p.a. with over 9 million whale watchers in 87 countries and territories (Hoyt, 2001). Within ten years the industry had grown to generate a total expenditure of US\$2.1 billion p.a., with 13 million people participating across 119 territories and countries in 2008 (O'Connor et al., 2009). Furthermore there are approximately 3300 operators offering whale watching trips globally, employing an estimated 13,200 people. In Asia, where whale watching has emerged as the world's important new destination, the number of whale watchers has grown from 220,000 in 1998 to over 1 million in 2008; expanding from 13 countries offering whale watching activities in 1998 to 20 in 2008 (O'Connor et al., 2009). At a local level it is estimated that the average number of operators per community is four and the number of direct jobs per whale watching operator is seven (Cisneros-Montemayor & Sumaila, 2010).

These substantial income and employment benefits, especially for developing countries, are likely to increase as long as the industry is managed sustainably at a destination level. Unfortunately this may not be the case in all destinations and this will have significant impacts on whale populations. Whale behaviours can be affected when there are too many boats or when the boats approach too close to the cetacean. However, it is often difficult to establish the long-term negative consequences of these short-term behavioural changes (Parsons, 2012). The behavioural changes induced by tourism activity can include modifications in swimming behaviour, travelling direction, travelling path, travelling speed, group size and coordination, feeding time, surfacing intervals, and displacement from the disturbance area (Chen, 2011; Higham et al., 2009; Parsons, 2012; Weinrich & Corbelli, 2009). Longer term impacts can include chronic levels of stress resulting in negative effects on health as well as reduced reproductive rates (Orams, 2004; Parsons, 2012). In addition whales can also be killed or injured as a result of collisions with whale-watching vessels, especially in areas

where there is a high intensity of whale watching traffic. The speed of the vessels also contributes to collisions (International Whaling Commission, 2003).

The negative impacts from whale watching have encouraged many countries and states to introduce different laws, guidelines and codes to manage the industry (Cole, 2007; Garrod & Fennell, 2004; Parsons, 2012). The introduction of guidelines and/or regulations has been the most common method of trying to mitigate the impacts of tour boat whale-watching (Parsons, 2012). However, there are no internationally binding laws regarding whale watching despite the International Whaling Commission considering the legal aspects of whale watching including 'model' legislation from around the world (O'Connor et al., 2009). In general most whale watching guidelines are entirely voluntary while approximately one-third are regulatory or 'legal' (Garrod & Fennell, 2004).

Most guidelines attempt to prevent vessels from 'harassing animals' and/or striking whales, and include features such as minimum approach distances, speed zones, buffer zones, approach angles, noise controls and spatial or temporal 'refuges' (Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2006; Parsons, 2012; Wiley, Moller, Pace, & Carlson, 2008). These measures are expected to protect whales and the valuable industry that develops around them. Despite the existence of guidelines many do not curtail invasive activities such as chasing whales because they do not include a comprehensive set of expected behaviours (Garrod & Fennell, 2004). Parsons (2012) also notes that the existence of guidelines, regulations, or laws is often not complied with due to poor compliance and monitoring as well as a chronic lack of enforcement. The lack of monitoring and enforcement arises from various reasons including a lack of resources, logistic support, capacity and will (Parsons, 2012). Voluntary codes of conduct, which are often seen as 'soft' visitor management tools (Cole, 2007), are "enforced primarily by ethical obligation and peer pressure" (Garrod & Fennell, 2004; p. 339).

In addition to the provision of guidelines it is becoming increasingly accepted that education and interpretation are important components of a satisfying tourism experience, especially those occurring in the natural environment and involving wildlife (Luck, 2003). Education/interpretation provided on-board whale-watching vessels is likely to be viewed as an important part of the tour (see Mayes & Richins, 2008) as well as increasing customer satisfaction (Parsons, Warburton, Woods-Ballard, Hughes, & Johnston, 2003). Moscardo and Saltzer (2005, p.8) note that "there is a substantial correlation between the amount visitors believed they learnt about the wildlife during their visit and their overall satisfaction with the wildlife experience". An equally important outcome from education/interpretation is that it can help reduce the negative impacts on whales (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2002). Bentz, Rodrigues, Dearden, Calado, and Lopes (2015) also note that overcrowding can also reduce visitor satisfaction.

Another method for managing the impacts of whale watching is to limit the number of licences issued to operators (Kessler & Harcourt, 2013). The selection process used to determine the allocation of licences could be utilised to ensure reputable operators gain the licences.

3. Tourism in Sri Lanka

The potential of tourism to contribute to the country's economic development was initially articulated in 1960s with the release of the first Tourism Management Plan in 1967 (Ceylon Tourist Board, 1968). After the release of the Plan the industry experienced considerable growth in international visitation during the 1970s however with the commencement of the Civil War in 1983 numbers stagnated at between 400,000 and 500,000 visitors (Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority, n.d.). In addition to the stagnation there were some substantial declines experienced in the aftermath of various serious terrorist events. Since the war ended in 2009 international visitation has increased rapidly from 447,890 in 2009 to 1.5 million visitors in

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