

Whale watching book questions industry sustainability

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Whale and dolphin watching may not be the low-impact, sustainable industries many believe them to be according to a new evidence-based book, co-edited by Associate Professor Lars Bejder of the Murdoch University Cetacean Research Unit.

Whale-watching: Sustainable Tourism and Ecological Management critically explores the complex issues associated with the sustainable management of whale watching, highlighting the spectacular growth in demand for tourist interactions with cetaceans in the wild, and the challenge of effective policy, planning and management.

"Whale watching has developed very quickly around the world and has

been strongly advocated by non-governmental organisations, governments and tourism development agencies, which highlight the assumed sustainability of 'non-consumptive' enterprises. This book really puts the spotlight on that," said co-editor Professor James Higham from New Zealand's University of Otago.

"If you don't hunt and kill whales or dolphins, but shoot them with cameras rather than harpoons, then it may intuitively be considered non-consumptive. But as the industry has grown animal populations have come under more and more pressure, and the 'non-consumptive' nature of whale watching has been drawn into question."

The book's editors said while whale watching has been widely portrayed as a sustainable alternative to whale hunting since the early 1980s, simply assuming that whale watching is sustainable obscures the potential unsustainable [whale-watching](#) practices.

Associate Professor Bejder's own research in Shark Bay, a popular site for viewing bottlenose dolphins, demonstrates that as the level of interaction increases, so too does the effect on the animals' habitat use and numbers.

"Whales and dolphins frequent certain ecological regions because they are good places to feed, or rest, or raise young," said Associate Professor Bejder.

"Take the spinner dolphins of Hawai'i. They feed at night in offshore waters and go into shallow, protected bays to rest and socialise during the day – but that's where and when tourists gather to watch them, potentially disturbing their critical daily resting period."

Professor Higham said the book highlights that, in considering the relationships that exist between humans and cetaceans, terms such as

'exploitative' and 'consumptive' must be used advisedly.

"The transition from physical extraction (hunting) to the selling of 'services' (tourist experiences) should acknowledge that both may be exploitative and consumptive in different ways and to varying degrees," he said.

Whale-watching was edited by Associate Professor Bejder, Professor Higham and Dr. Rob Williams, a Canadian marine conservation biologist and a Marie Curie Senior Research Fellow with the Sea Mammal Research Unit at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.

All three editors said the book explores the challenges of sustainability, but also offers potential solutions to overcome or reduce the impact on these animals. It takes account of different regional and national contexts, and employs insights from experiences in Shark Bay (Australia) and Kaikoura (New Zealand).

Professor Higham and Associate Professor Bejder agreed there was a real need to comprehensively address the subject of human interaction with whales and dolphins.

"This is a contentious and political subject. Just looking at the function and actions of the International Whaling Commission is a political viper's nest," Professor Higham said.

Provided by Murdoch University

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