COMMUNITY-BASED WHALE WATCHING, GUIDELINES AND CODES OF CONDUCT

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In this presentation I will:

- briefly note a few examples of community-based whale watching;
- highlight a developing, community-based project in Chile; and
- summarize and discuss examples of guidelines and codes for whale watching developed by community associations and cooperatives.
Community-based whale watching exists in many regions of the world—both regulated and opportunistic. In ‘Whale Watching 2001’, Hoyt estimated that 500 communities worldwide offered some form of whale watching. Today, this number has increased to approximately 600.
In the United States, these ventures range from a cooperative of fishermen off Washington State to a now 31 year-old, multi-million dollar industry in Massachusetts- one that began as a small, reputable charter boat taking passengers fishing a few kilometers from shore.

In both areas, there was an established infrastructure to facilitate and support the expansion of whale watch tourism.
In the eastern Caribbean Islands of Dominica, Guadeloupe, St Lucia and Grenada, whale watching grew not from fishing charters or artisanal fisheries, but from small, well-established dive operations.

In all cases, the areas already were designated as tourist ‘hot spots’ and whale watching easily became part of diverse cultural and eco-tourism packages.
Ogata is one of 7 communities in Japan that cooperatively manage whale watching. The owners of local fishing vessels schedule boat tours on a rotation basis. A whale mural in the port and the whale watch/fisherman’s center with its small café and gift shop, helped to create a successful image and identity for the community (Hoyt 2001).
However, in Japan, almost 95% of the whale watchers are Japanese. Marketing to an international audience remains a challenge for this isolated community.
In Kaikoura, New Zealand, whale watching benefits have been spread throughout the entire community-with restaurants, guesthouses and souvenir shops. ALL of this due to whale and dolphin watching.
Perhaps more applicable, is a work in progress - the development of community-based eco-tourism, including whale watching, in a small fishing cooperative in Northwestern Chiloe Island, Chile by Centro Conservation Cetacea (CCC).
The goals of this project, now in its fifth year, are to:

1. determine the species and habitat use of the whales in the area;

2. educate the community about the benefits of responsible eco-tourism- including penguin and whale watching;

3. develop eco-tourism guidelines specific for local species and their habitat use based on the best available science before the development of whale watching and the expansion of other eco-tourism activities in the area; and

4. encourage the community to actively support and comply with the guidelines or regulations once established.
DETERMINE THE SPECIES AND HABITAT USE OF THE WHALES IN THE AREA

Dedicated aerial, land and boat-based surveys are conducted from February to April each year. Data collection includes: photo-identification; plankton tows; water temperature; acoustic recordings; and water and fecal samples.
EDUCATE THE COMMUNITY ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF RESPONSIBLE ECO-TOURISM- INCLUDING WHALE WATCHING

Systematic workshops for the community have been held on several issues including: the state of the marine environment; development of responsible marine eco-tourism; diversification of products and services; marketing; and management strategies (e.g. formation of associations, fundraising)
DEVELOP ECO-TOURISM GUIDELINES SPECIFIC FOR LOCAL SPECIES AND THEIR HABITAT USE BASED ON THE BEST AVAILABLE SCIENCE BEFORE THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHALE WATCHING AND THE EXPANSION OF OTHER ECO-TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA

Based on the best available science, guidelines will be drafted with the input of the community and presented to the Government by December 2007. The proposed guidelines seek to establish regulations for existing eco-tourism activities as well as whale watching, before the industry is developed.
ENCOURAGE THE COMMUNITY TO ACTIVELY SUPPORT AND COMPLY WITH GUIDELINES OR REGULATIONS ONCE ESTABLISHED

The views and concerns of the community, expressed at the workshops, have been incorporated into developing a strategy for the sustainable development of the Northwest Chiloe area. As a result, the community is actively committed to improve the standards of eco-tourism including whale watching.
RESULTS

Four years of boat-based, coastal and aerial surveys have shown that the waters of Northwest Chiloe support several species of cetaceans including blue, humpback and sei whales and Peale’s, Chilean and Risso’s dolphins.
Spouts of blue whales readily can be seen from the coast and the use of the area for feeding has been documented for blue, sei and humpback whales. Results of these analyses have been presented at the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission, the Society for Marine Mammology and published in peer-reviewed journals.
Based on information received in the workshops, the community requested a recreational carrying-capacity study to improve the standards of penguin watching and therefore the conservation of local species.

The ongoing study will be completed in October 2007 and a proposal for regulation will be presented by CCC and local tour operators.
Local tour operators traveled to Argentina to exchange eco-tourism experiences with whale watch operators, scientists and national authorities. As a result, the community learned how whale watching could be conducted for long-term sustainability. This included the improvement of services for tourists as well as the enhancement of the beach area.
Perhaps the most telling, is that the community has chosen to wait to initiate whale watching until the guidelines are in place, despite increasing interest from tourists about whales in the area.
GUIDELINES AND CODES OF CONDUCT
Sixteen cooperatives and associations world-wide have developed guidelines and codes of conduct for whale and dolphin watching. Some were developed in consultation with officials, NGO’s, local scientists and other stakeholders.
Most of the guidelines and codes are voluntary and area and species specific. Many, for dolphin watching, follow basic, common sense principles. These include:

- Do not approach dolphins - let them come to the vessel
- Do not touch, feed or swim with dolphins
- Do not interfere with their direction of travel
- Do not separate animals in a group
- No sudden changes in speed or direction
- When in the vicinity of dolphins, move parallel to and slightly behind the pod
- Do not litter
Recommendations for approach distances vary from 50m to 100m.

Recommendations for maximum time spent with a pod of dolphins range from 15 to 30 minutes.

Recommendations for numbers of boats in the vicinity of dolphins range from 1 to 2.

Most codes have special considerations for pods with mothers and calves.
Training programs for crew were recommended, as well as an education program and scientific data collection.
While these guidelines and codes were developed to promote responsible whale watching, in many regions still there are too many boats, moving too fast and approaching too close to whales and dolphins.
To this end, a meeting was held at the 16th Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals in 2005 to discuss the use of voluntary codes of conduct for wildlife watching boats. The meeting was attended by 44 participants from 13 countries and included: scientists, government agencies, non-profit groups, tour boat operators and educators.
After discussion, the participants agreed that:

Guidelines or codes should be simple and easily recognizable. For example, maximum number of boats around whales should include all boats, tour and recreational.
Captains, crew and naturalists should be trained and accredited. This is of particular importance in areas where there is a high turnover of personnel.
And it was recommended that a hands-on education program be developed and scientific data be collected – from both land and boat-based whale watching - whenever possible.
Examples were noted of several areas where guidelines or codes have been in effect for several years and there is little to no compliance. The group therefore recommended that regulation, rather than voluntary codes, be implemented and that the process involve the participation of tour operators and other stakeholders.
And finally, following the example of Brazil and South Africa, it is of benefit to the whales- and to industry- to be prescriptive and regulate whale watching before the industry begins.
GRACIAS!