

Swim or dive with cetacean in Latin America.

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ABSTRACT

Most of the 84 species of whales and dolphins are included in whale watch programmes, with the exception of the beaked whales. To evaluate ‘swim-with-cetacean’ and ‘dive-with-cetacean’ programmes in Latin America, a questionnaire was sent to researchers, tour operators and non governmental organizations, and a review of information available on web site was also undertaken. Swim- and dive-with-cetacean programmes are established in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Mexico. In Argentina, diving clubs organize underwater tours during the Southern Right Whale breeding season at Peninsula Valdes, the main breeding area in the Southwestern Atlantic and encounters between divers and cetaceans, mainly whales, are common. At least 12 species of whales and dolphins are involved in swim-with-cetacean activities in Latin America, and the three most frequent species involved are *Megaptera novaeangliae*, *Stenella attenuata* and *Tursiops truncatus*. Activities include swimming, snorkelling or diving with cetaceans.

KEYWORDS: WHALE WATCHING, SWIM-WITH-CETACEAN, LATIN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

Whale watching has an important educational, environmental, scientific, and others socioeconomic benefits (IFAW *et al.*, 1995; IFAW *et al.*, 1997; IFAW, 1999; Hoyt 1994a, 1994b, 1997a, 1997b, 2001) in 87 countries (Hoyt, 2001). The most common form of whale watching is boat-based (72% of all whale watching) followed by land-based whale watching (28% of all whale watching). Less than 0,001 of all whale watching consists of fixed-wing or helicopter tours (Hoyt, 2001). Of the 84 species of whales and dolphins, most of them are included in whale watching programmes. The most common species for this industry in Latin America are the Southern right whale, Humpback whale, Minke whale, Sperm whale, Gray whale, Bottlenose dolphin, Spotted dolphin and Common dolphin (Hoyt 2001). Swimming with cetaceans in the wild represents less than 5% of the world whale watching business. However, in some countries such as New Zealand and the Bahamas, it occupies considerably more, and may even approach 50% of the whale watch business (Hoyt, *pers. comm.*). For this paper “swim or dive-with-cetacean” is defined as the aquatic interaction between the fee-paying public with cetaceans in the wild.

The Sub Committee on whale watching at IWC54 recommended that a review of “swim-with-whale and dolphin” programmes be a priority in 2003. Rose *et al.* (2003) review commercial operations which involve swim-with-whales tourism worldwide.

The objective of this work is to evaluate ‘swim-with-cetacean’ and ‘dive-with-cetacean’ programmes in Latin America.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To evaluate ‘swim-with-cetacean’ and ‘dive-with-cetacean’ programmes in Latin America, a questionnaire was sent to researchers, tour operators and non governmental organizations, and a review of information available on web site was also undertaken to determine the importance of ‘swim-with-cetacean’ and ‘dive-with-cetacean’ programmes in Latin America.

RESULTS

‘Swim-with-cetacean’ and ‘dive-with-cetacean’ programmes in Latin America are established in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Mexico. Table 1 summarizes cetaceans species and number of companies involved in these programmes per countries.

Argentina

Swimming or diving with marine mammals has been banned since 1985 in Peninsula Valdes, Chubut province. Only scientists, photographers and film makers may swim or dive with marine mammals with a special permit. Photographers and film makers must pay a fee to have a permit. Even though the activity is banned, divers have interacted [I think that is what you mean] with southern right whales (SRW) (*Eubalaena australis*) since 1970. Three kinds of reactions are described for SRW: 1.) SRW left the area after finding an approaching diver, (2) SRW interacts with divers for 15' approximately and later on left the area and (3) An adult SRW pushes with its back gently a diver to the surface. Whale moves very slowly and it does not breath at surface. It can last for 2 hrs.

Divers normally left the water while interacting with a juvenile SRW because it became very active.

They also reported that mother-calf pair approach close to them. Whales reaction can be: 1) the mother stay between divers and <1 month old calf, avoiding the contact and (2) the mother stay very close to an interacting group of a 2-3 months old calf and divers. Calves usually approach to divers to play.

Sometimes using whales callosities, divers recognized individuals and they found same individuals close approach and interact with them in successive days in the same location.

On the other hand, few divers reported negative interaction between SRWs and divers. Experienced divers agreed that negative interaction can occur with inexperienced divers or with groups lead by inexperienced diver guides. An experienced diver guide does not allow divers to swim or dive-with-juvenile SRW even though it seems to be friendly. Juveniles are considered by divers potentially dangerous.

Occasional encounters with dusky dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus obscurus*) are also reported by divers.

A tour operator of Ria Deseado, Santa Cruz province promote to snorkelling with Commerson's dolphins (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) while they are found in the area where a nature trip is developed.

Brazil

Fernando de Noronha National Park, was created in September 1988. It is controlled by IBAMA which bans any nautical activity or diving tours in the National Park with Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*).

IBAMA provide permits for scientists and film crew to dive-with-dolphins but, in addition, if during diving tours *S. longirostris* are found, interactions are permitted for few minutes. Tourists pay a fee which helps researchers to study cetaceans in the local waters.

Entanglement in fishing gear used to impact dolphins and Hawksbill sea turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*).

Now, however, ex-fishermen protect the local marine resources. A very well developed educational program is run by IBAMA staff that controls the archipelago. They also give lectures on Fernando de Noronha marine's resources.

Costa Rica

Nine “swim or dive-with cetaceans” programmes are included in nature or diving tours. All of them were established on the Pacific Coast (table 1). Three kind of activities are used: to swim, to snorkel and to use a board tied to a boat. The species involved in “swim or dive-with cetaceans” programmes are Pantropical spotted dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*), Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), Short-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*), Short-finned Pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*), Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) and Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Bottlenose dolphin and Pantropical spotted dolphin are the most common species involved in this programmes. 66.66% of the tour operators has a naturalist guide or a biologist.

Ecuador

It seems there are no excursions trips to the Galapagos that offer “swim-with-whales and dolphins”, even though if bottlenose dolphins and Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) are found during diving activities, divers can interact with cetaceans. A regulation on Humpback whale watching activities ban to dive with whales since 2002.

Mexico

Swimming or diving with cetaceans in the area of Bahia de Banderas is illegal (L. Rojas, *pers. comm.*) although, as in Peninsula Valdes, Argentina, divers interact opportunistically with cetaceans they encounter, and a biologist-guided swimming and snorkelling programme is offered for bottlenose dolphins and sometimes humpback whales.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The most common species involved are Bottlenose dolphin and Pantropical spotted dolphin and large whales are humpback whales. More than 14 commercial operations offer nature trips or diving trips that include “swim or dive-with-cetaceans” in Latin America. All of them do not guarantee to “swim or dive-with-cetacean”, it depends on if there are any cetaceans in the areas that tours are visiting.

The increase in prevalence of this activity is really remarkable in Costa Rica. Cubero-Pardo *et al.* (2001) reported that only one tour operator who accept to be interview, promoted “swim-with-dolphins” activities in Bahía Drake. In this paper we report nine new companies including two new locations (Golfo Papagayo and Golfo Dulce).

In conclusions we can agree that “swim or dive-with cetacean” is increasing in Latin America (*E.g.*: Costa Rica) and it would also happen in many different areas of the world. Hoyt (*pers. comm.*) reported that it may even approach 50% of the whale watch business.

Even though diving tours are not classified as part of the whale watch business, they are very important at the moment to evaluate this activity. Future review should include interviewing diving companies which include or promote “swim or dive-with-dolphins”.

We also want to express our concern at the lack of research to evaluate the impacts of “swim-with-cetacean” programmes and to encourage this kind of research.

Country	Location	WW Species	Number of companies
Argentina	Peninsula Valdes	Southern right whales Dusky dolphins	Unknown
	Ria Deseado	Commerson’s dolphins	1
Brazil	Fernando de Noronha	Spinner dolphins	3
Costa Rica	Golfo Dulce	Bottlenone dolphin and Pantropical spotted dolphin	3
	Bahia Drake	Bottlenose dolphin, Pantropical spotted dolphin, Short-beaked common dolphin, , Short- finned pilot whale, Killer whales , Sperm whale, Blue whale.	5
	Golfo Papagayo	Bottlenose dolphin, Pantropical spotted dolphin, Short-finned pilot whale and Humpback whale	1
Ecuador	Galapagos Island	Bottlenose dolphins and Killer whales	Unknown
Mexico	Bahia de Banderas	Bottlenose dolphin and Humpback whales	1

Table 1. Species and number of companies involved in “swim or dive-with-cetaceans” programmes per countries.

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