Responsible whale watching and whale welfare

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Background
Whale watching is defined as tours by air, sea or land to view any of the 86 reported species of whales, dolphins and porpoises in their natural habitat where a commercial aspect exists (IFAW 1999). Whale-watching platforms include small boats, sailboats, cruise ships, inflatables, kayaks, helicopters and airplanes, and the activity can also include observation from land-based sites and approaches made by swimmers. In addition to being non-disruptive to the cetacean population, ‘responsible whale watching’ has many potential educational, environmental, scientific and socioeconomic benefits for human communities (Hoyt & Iñíguez 2008). As a result, tourism of this kind can have a positive effect on nature through the promotion of a general interest and awareness in cetaceans, sustainable economic growth for local economies (which are often otherwise struggling), therefore providing multiple benefits, including improved motivation to preserve marine wildlife.

The growth of the whale-watching industry
Whale watching has a long history and there is increasing interest in whale watching in general. In 1955, the first commercial whale-watching operation was developed by a fisherman named Chuck Chamberlain, who charged US$1 to view grey whales (Eschrichtius robustus) on their winter migration off the coast of San Diego. Over the course of a few years, the activity slowly spread up and down the west coast of North America, involving the US, Canada and Mexico. In the 1970s, whale watching spread to the east coast of the US and Canada, and in the 1980s expanded to Europe, South America as well as elsewhere in the world (Hoyt 2002). In 2008, 13 million people participated in whale watching in 119 countries and territories, generating a total expenditure of US$2.1 billion (O’Connor et al 2009). As well as Chamberlain, who was recognised as the first commercial whale-watching operator, the late Robbins Barstow, former President of the Cetacean Society International, worked passionately to promote responsible whale watching and organised the first IWC ‘Global Conference on the Non-Consumptive Utilisation of Cetacean Resources’ in 1983 (Connecticut Cetacean Society [CCS] and Animal Welfare Institute [AWI] 1983). The business of whale watching is still expanding. For example, in 2006/2007, there were 91 communities offering whale watching across 18 Latin American countries, nearly all of which were outside the main cities and industrial centres. From a comprehensive review completed in 2008, this eco-tourism activity had a steady growth of 11.3% per year (1998–2006). This rate of growth is three times that of world tourism and almost five times the rate of Latin American tourism over approximately the same period. In 2006/2007, whale-watching trips generated US$79.4 million in ticket sales and US$278.1 million in total expenditure (Hoyt & Iñíguez 2008).

A unique aspect of whale watching in Latin America, relative to other areas around the world, is that whale watching in this region is often managed within marine protected areas (MPAs). This allows for a tourism experience that is more benign and the sustained success of whale watching in sanctuaries and reserves further supports the concept and maintenance of such MPAs.

Species involved
Many species of cetacean are involved in whale watching, but the most frequently ‘watched’ are the grey, humpback (Megaptera novaeangliae), northern right (Eubalaena glacialis) and southern right whales (Eubalaena australis), common minke (Balaenoptera acutorostrata), sperm (Physeter macrocephalus), killer (Orcinus orca) and pilot whales (species of the genus Globicephala), common bottlenose dolphin (Tursiops truncatus), Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin (Tursiops aduncus) and bottle-nosed dolphin (Tursiops aduncus) ...