

RESEARCH NOTE

PROMOTION OF ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES BY WHALE-WATCHING COMPANIES' MARKETING EFFORTS

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For the whale-watching industry to be managed according to ecotourism principles, it should focus on nature-based attractions, provide environmental education, and promote environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Using 62 whale-watching brochures from 1998, 2005, and 2010, the study analyzed how whale-watching companies on Vancouver Island, Canada, marketed their businesses in line with these three ecotourism principles. The results suggest that Vancouver Island whale-watching companies promote most ecotourism principles, primarily those orientated to nature-based attractions and environmental education, but more attention could be paid to sustainability. The total number of environmental education activities and environmental sustainability initiatives increased over time, but most individual variables addressing the ecotourism principles did not change over time.

Key words: Whale watching; Ecotourism; Principles; Brochures; Conservation; Sustainability

Introduction

Fennell (2008) defines ecotourism as, “a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas” (p. 24). According to several experts (Blamey, 2001; Orams

& Taylor, 2005; Weaver & Lawton, 2007), ecotourism should satisfy three core criteria: 1) attractions that are focused on the natural environment, 2) visitor experiences that encourage environmental education, and 3) management that supports ecological, social, and economic sustainability.

Whale watching is often considered to be ecotourism (Hvenegaard, 1994; Parsons & Scarpaci, 2010), given its reliance on natural attractions (Higham, Bejder, & Lusseau, 2009), frequent provision of education by trained guides (Forestell,

1993; Zeppel & Muloin, 2008), and potential support of sustainability (Curtin, 2003; International Fund for Animal Welfare, 1999). Since the 1980s, international whale watching increased rapidly (Hoyt, 2001; O'Connor, Campbell, Cortez, & Knowles, 2009). In 2008, whale watching attracted more than 13 million participants in 119 countries, resulting in 2.1 billion US\$ in expenditures (O'Connor et al., 2009). In Canada, whale watching attracted about 1.2 million whale watchers in 2008, involving about 206 operators, and resulted in expenditures of over 150 million CA\$ (O'Connor et al., 2009). Most of the whale watching in Canada occurs in Quebec, British Columbia (BC), Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick (Lien, 2001). BC provided whale watching for 430,600 participants (an increase of 4.2% per year since 1998) through 47 operators (O'Connor et al., 2009). The main ports for whale watching in BC include Victoria, Long Beach, Telegraph Cove, and Campbell River. About 80% of BC whale-watching trips take place in Haro Strait (part of the San Juan Islands) near Victoria, Vancouver, and Cowichan Bay (O'Connor et al., 2009).

According to Parsons et al. (2006, p. 251), for whale watching companies to be considered whale ecotourism, they should:

- Actively assist with the conservation of their resource (cetaceans);
- Provide appropriate, accurate, and detailed interpretative/educational materials or activities for their clientele about the cetaceans viewed and their associated habitat;
- Minimize their environmental impact;
- Adhere to whale watching regulations or an appropriate set of guidelines, if no specific regulations are available for the area; and
- Provide some benefits to the local host community within which the company operates.

There have been few studies examining the level of compliance with ecotourism guidelines or principles by ecotourism operators. Some of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting compliance include the type of social and economic sanctions, gender of the operator, perceived moral obligation, and level of revenue generated from ecotourism

(Sirakaya, 1997). Moreover, researchers are just beginning to examine the extent to which whale-watching companies comply with ecotourism principles or whale-watching guidelines. Most studies have focused on attractions (Muloin, 1998), effectiveness of environmental education (Lück, 2003), adherence to viewing distance and location guidelines (Jelinski, Krueger, & Duffus, 2002; Scarpaci, Dayanthi, & Corkeron, 2003; Whitt & Read, 2006), and role in sustainable development (Orams, 2002). Additional indicators about compliance may come from whale-watching companies' stated intentions in their marketing efforts, the focus of this study.

Many information sources are used by tourism companies to market their products and by visitors to gather information (Molina & Esteban, 2006). Even though the Internet plays a prominent role in making tourism decisions in an increasingly technological world (Lovelock, 2009), brochures remain frequently used by tourists (Andereck, 2005) and by whale watchers (Warburton, Parsons, Woods-Ballard, Hughes, & Johnston, 2001). A brochure is "a form of printed promotional material designed to communicate with existing or potential tourists" (Molina & Esteban, 2006, p. 1041). Brochures are effective tools for promoting image formation, helping visitors choose destinations and tour companies, and increasing satisfaction from tourism experiences (Molina & Esteban, 2006; Santos, 1998). Thus, they are used by tour companies to convey information to visitors about their products and company objectives (Wicks & Schuett, 1991). Brochures and local printed information are important in the whale watching industry, as a basic tool for creating awareness about whale watching opportunities and conservation issues (International Fund for Animal Welfare [IFAW], World Wildlife Fund [WWF], and Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society [WDCS], 1997; Warburton et al., 2001). While the consistency between advertising through brochures and actual practice is not guaranteed, brochures can provide a valuable indicator of a tour company's practices.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which tourism brochures used by whale watching companies on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, promote the principles of ecotourism, and if that promotion has increased over time. The authors hypothesize that marketing of

whale watching will support the principles of ecotourism (as outlined by Blamey, 2001; Orams & Taylor, 2005; Weaver & Lawton, 2007) and that, due to increased awareness of ecotourism (Fennell, 2008; Weaver, 2001) and the increased need for whale conservation (Hoyt, 2005), this support will have increased over time.

Methods

This study used whale-watching brochures from three time periods to analyze the extent to which whale-watching companies on Vancouver Island marketed their businesses in line with ecotourism principles. Brochures were collected from the Victoria Ferry and Victoria Visitor Centre between June and August (the prime whale watching periods) of 1998, 2005, and 2010. Brochures were typically single, double, or triple-paneled, and folded into a 10 × 23-cm format. We chose to use brochures over websites because content in the former was more comparable within a standardized format, while content in the latter varied considerably. The brochures were visually scanned and coded according to the three ecotourism principles of nature-based attractions, environmental education, and sustainability. Potential variables associated with each principle were noted during a preliminary examination of these brochures, and then later systematically quantified.

First, nature-based attractions referred to whales, non-whale wildlife (e.g., sea lions, eagles, and bears), and the natural environment (e.g., hot springs and scenery). Culture-based attractions referred to food, dance, buildings, museums, traditional boats, and shelters. These attractions were identified, counted, and standardized to percentages for each brochure in two ways, through words and photographs.

Second, the environmental education principle used nine variables (coded yes/no) regarding a company's statements about: 1) providing interpretation, 2) guide quality, 3) offering pretour orientation, 4) offering hydrophones, 5) addressing whale conservation issues, 6) addressing general wildlife and environment issues, 7) providing a video log, 8) providing free printed information, and 9) providing a map of the whale-watching area. The total number of environmental education activities was

produced by counting the number of positive results among these nine variables.

Sustainability variables were divided into two categories environmental and economic sustainability. Since social sustainability was not mentioned on the brochures, it was not included in this analysis. For environmental sustainability, the study examined the following variables (coded yes/no) regarding a company stating that it: 1) is committed to conservation, 2) provides an opportunity for tourists to donate to conservation, 3) donates to conservation or whale research, 4) is a member of an ecotourism or whale watching association, 5) uses ecofriendly vessels, 6) complies with whale-watching or wildlife-viewing guidelines, and 7) practices waste management. The total number of environmental sustainability initiatives was produced by counting the number of positive results among these seven variables. For economic sustainability, the study examined two variables (coded yes/no) regarding a company indicating: 1) the level of local employment and 2) local ownership. The total number of economic sustainability initiatives was produced by counting the number of positive results of these two variables. Trends over time were tested using chi-square analyses and analyses of variance, based on a significance level of 0.05. Post hoc multiple comparisons used Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference test.

Results

The sample consisted of 62 brochures, 27 from 1998, 15 from 2005, and 20 from 2010, representing 36 different whale-watching companies. Eleven companies had brochures available in all 3 years, and 15 companies had brochures available in both 2005 and 2010. Of the 36 whale watching companies, 21 were from Victoria, 8 from Tofino, 3 from Campbell River, 3 from Sidney, and 1 from Sooke. The word "ecotourism" was not mentioned on any brochures, but two companies described their tours as "ecotours."

In terms of the types of attractions emphasized by the companies, this study examined words and photographs (Table 1). First, based on words in 2010, 92% of the attractions mentioned in the brochures were about nature (37% about whales, 25% about non-whale wildlife, and 30% about the natural

Table 1

Promotion of Ecotourism Principles, Based on Marketing Efforts Through Brochures From 1998, 2005, and 2010, by Whale-Watching Companies on Vancouver Island, BC, Canada

Category	Variable	Subvariable	1998	2005	2010	Statistics	
Nature-based attractions	Words	% about whales	32	41	37	ns	
		% about non-whale wildlife	24	22	25	ns	
		% about natural environment	32	29	30	ns	
		% about culture and history	12	8	8	ns	
	Photos	% about whales	66 ^a	62 ^{ab}	52 ^b	$F = 3.4, p = 0.041$	
		% about non-whale wildlife	22	20	37	ns	
		% about natural environment	5	12	4	ns	
		% about culture and history	7	6	8	ns	
		Words and photos	Total number of species represented	7.2	4.8	5.9	ns
			% providing interpretation	85	87	90	ns
Environmental education	Words and photos	% indicating guide quality	67	73	80	ns	
		% offering pretour orientation	0	0	5	ns	
		% offering hydrophones	30	40	60	ns	
		% addressing whale conservation issues	0	7	10	ns	
		% addressing general wildlife and environment issues	4	20	25	ns	
		% providing a video log	0	7	10	ns	
		% providing free printed information	0	7	5	ns	
		% providing a map of the whale-watching area	22	27	40	ns	
		Total number of environmental education activities	2.7 ^a	3.3 ^{ab}	3.7 ^b	$F = 4.2, p = 0.019$	
		% stating a commitment to conservation	4	13	25	ns	
		% donating to conservation or whale research	19	33	5	ns	
		% providing opportunity for tourists to donate to conservation	0	7	10	ns	
		% indicating membership in an ecotourism or whale watching association	11	40	25	ns	
		% indicating vessel is ecofriendly	4	13	55	$\chi^2 = 18.3, p < 0.001$	
Sustainability	Environmental	% following wildlife viewing guidelines	15	47	40	ns	
		% practicing waste management or recycling	0	0	0	ns	
		Total number of environmental sustainability initiatives	0.5 ^a	1.5 ^b	1.6 ^b	$F = 5.6, p = 0.006$	
		Economic	% indicating local ownership	0	0	5	ns
			% indicating local employment	0	0	5	ns
			Total number of economic sustainability initiatives	0	0	0.1	ns

^{ab}Any two means that do not have the same superscript are significantly different at $p < 0.05$. ns, statistical tests for differences were not significant.

environment), while only 8% were about culture and history. There were no statistical differences over time in the percentage of words describing attractions. Second, based on photographs, 93% of attractions highlighted in the brochures emphasized nature-based attractions (52% of whales, 37% of non-whale wildlife, and 4% of the natural

environment). The percentage of photographs of whales declined from 66% in 1998 to 52% in 2010. The number of species indicated by either words or photographs ranged from 4.8 to 7.2.

The brochures indicated that whale-watching companies used a variety of environmental education techniques, with an emphasis on providing

interpretation, indicating guide quality, offering hydrophones, and providing a map of the whale-watching area (Table 1). Companies were less likely to indicate that they offer pretour orientation, discuss whale conservation issues, discuss general wildlife or environmental issues, provide a video log, or provide free printed information. The total number of environmental education activities increased over time, from 2.7 in 1998 to 3.7 in 2010. However, for individual environmental education activities, there were no statistical differences over time.

In terms of environmental sustainability, companies' declarations about their commitment to conservation, donations to conservation or whale research, provision of opportunities for tourists to donate to conservation, and waste management or recycling practices were fairly low (Table 1). In 2010, only 25% of companies indicated their membership in an ecotourism or whale-watching association (of the 10 companies operating out of Victoria, six were members of the Pacific Whale Watch Association, the organization promoting research, education, and responsible wildlife viewing in the adjacent San Juan Islands area). Forty percent of companies stated that they followed wildlife viewing guidelines. In 1998, only 4% of companies indicated that their vessels were eco-friendly, but this increased to 55% in 2010. The total number of environmental sustainability initiatives increased from 0.5 in 1998 to 1.6 in 2010. In terms of economic sustainability, indications of local ownership and local employment were not mentioned in 1998 and 2005, but were mentioned by 5% in 2010.

Conclusion

A whale-watching brochure reflects a company's concern for the target species and for the environment in general, provides educational souvenirs, and instills confidence in clients (IFAW, WWF & WDCS, 1997). An analysis of marketing efforts through brochures by whale-watching companies on Vancouver Island indicates the promotion of some of ecotourism's key principles (Weaver & Lawton, 2007), primarily those related to nature-based attractions and environmental education, but lacks attention to environmental and economic

sustainability. As a form of ecotourism, whale watching has the potential to have, "many positive environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts" (Weaver, 2001, p. 238). In terms of emphasis on nature-based attractions through either words or photographs, whale-watching companies overwhelmingly stress whales and other non-whale natural attractions. This marketing balance between whale and non-whale natural attractions may indicate increasing interest in diverse attractions among ecotourists (Wight, 2001) and whale watchers (Parsons et al., 2003a). However, the low emphasis on cultural and historical attractions suggests that marketing these experiences in a more diversified manner has limits in terms of increased interest among tourists.

Environmental education efforts by whale watching companies on Vancouver Island are important, as exemplified by the percentage offering education, stating guide quality, and including value-added educational activities such as hydrophones. The total number of environmental education activities offered by whale-watching companies increased over time, perhaps indicating the companies' responses to demand by whale-watching tourists (Stamation, Croft, Shaughnessy, Waples, & Briggs, 2007) or the need to differentiate their product (Warburton, 1999). Interpretation on whale-watching tours is in demand by whale watchers, provides opportunities for increased learning, and can help minimize negative impacts (Weaver, 2001).

Concerning environmental sustainability, the promotion of, and support for, conservation activities has considerable room for improvement. While the use of ecofriendly vessels is commendable (Erbe, 2002), there is opportunity to increase conservation support among whale-watching companies and tourists (Christensen, Rowe, & Needham, 2007). Indeed, many ecotourists indicate a willingness to support conservation initiative related to the area they are visiting (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998). The level of companies indicating in their brochures that they follow wildlife-viewing guidelines (40%) is smaller than the 89.5% reported in a survey of whale watchers in Scotland (Woods-Ballard et al., 2003). Regarding economic sustainability, there are clear connections between whale-watching tourism and long-term conservation (Parsons, Warburton, Woods-Ballard, Hughes,

& Johnston, 2003b), but that connection is not evident in the current analysis of whale-watching brochures. Similarly, there are links between whale watching and social sustainability (Curtin, 2003; Einarsson, 2009) that do not show up in this study.

The presence or lack of words and photographs about whale-watching activities does not necessarily mean these companies do or do not address these activities; these are only used as indicators of the promotion of ecotourism principles. A comprehensive study on the attitudes and practices of whale-watching company owners and tourists will allow for a better evaluation of the factors affecting the decisions of companies and tourists to promote the principles of ecotourism.

In conclusion, regarding the principles of ecotourism, whale-watching companies on Vancouver Island promote nature-based attractions and environmental education, but promote sustainability much less. The total number of environmental education activities and environmental sustainability initiatives increased over time, but most individual variables addressing the ecotourism principles did not change over time. Educational strategies targeted at whale-watching companies and organizations may increase the promotion rates of these ecotourism principles (Sirikaya, 1997). Educational strategies seem to be more effective than deterrence strategies (Sirakaya & Uysal, 1997). There is opportunity for whale-watching companies to more strongly promote ecotourism principles and the corresponding educational, environmental, economic, and social benefits of the industry (Hvenegaard, 1997).

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Biographical Notes

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