

INTRODUCTION

There is a certain fascination that people have always held for whales. People want to get close to them and, it sometimes seems, the whales actively choose to come to us. Possibly some of this fascination can be explained because of their considerable size, particularly for animals such as the humpbacks and right whales. They are so large that until you see one, it is quite difficult to imagine what they are really like - this being in spite of the countless books and films published about these fascinating creatures.

The smaller cetaceans are equally revered by the general public. The dolphins of Monkey Mia are a good example showing the lengths people will go to, in terms of travelling large distances to remote locations, just for the opportunity to see these animals up close and in the wild.

Only a few years ago the chance to get close to whales in the wild was largely in the domain of a handful of researchers or those fortunate few of the general public who happened across them while sailing or boating. The 'discovery' of areas such as Hervey Bay off the southern Queensland coast has changed all that. Now, large numbers of tourists can be transported daily, in both comfort and safety, to view the whales in their congregation areas, and sightings are virtually guaranteed.

Within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park there has also been an increase over the past few years in the number of tourist operators applying for permits to run commercial whale watching activities. In the Whitsunday Islands region, which is already a heavily used recreational and commercial tourism area, dedicated whale watch tours commenced in 1990 and have become more popular each year. In the southern Great Barrier Reef the island resorts among the Capricorn/Bunker Group of islands have engaged in whale watching for many years, but largely as an incidental part of their operations.

An increase in the opportunities to view whales for the general public also brings with it the increased potential for harassment of these creatures. This is particularly significant when whale watching is occurring in the critical offshore breeding and nursery areas for these endangered species.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority was aware of the need to discuss with other management agencies the requirement for updated guidelines for whale watching activities, together with a range of other important management issues.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Day 1 - 6 September

Arrival and registration

Day 2 - 7 September

- 8.45 am: *Introduction and welcoming address*
Mark Simmons - Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
- 9.15 am: *Resource Managers and Field Researchers- "Allies or adversaries"*
Paul Forestell - Pacific Whale Foundation, Maui
- 10.00 am: Morning tea
- 10.30 am: *Conservation Plan for whales and dolphins in Queensland*
Margaret Gooch on behalf of Tim Stevens, Queensland Dept of Environment and Heritage, Brisbane
- 11.30 am: *An overview of the whale watching industry in Western Australia 1989-1992*
Doug Coughran - Dept of Conservation and Land Management, Western Australia
- 12.30 pm: Lunch
- 2.00 pm: *Development of an environmental code and community awareness campaign for whale watchers*
Dick Olesinski - Dept of Environment and Land Management, South Australia
- 3.00 pm: Afternoon Tea
- 3.15 pm: *A look to the future - issues facing whale watching in Australia*
Workshop session

Day 3 - 8 September

- 9.00 am: *A review of educational materials developed for the Queensland whale watching industry*
Mark Simmons - Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
- 10.00 am: Morning Tea
- 10.30 am: *Development of whale watching and its implications for research*
Greg Kaufman - Pacific Whale Foundation, Maui
- 11.30 am: *The impacts of marine pollution on cetaceans*
Steve Raaymakers - Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
- 12.30 pm: Lunch
- 2.00 pm: *South Australian Encounters*
Chris Halstead - South Australian Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources
- 3.00 pm: Afternoon tea

Day 4 - 9 September

- 9.00 am: *Beyond the Breach - Managing for whale watching and whale conservation in Hervey Bay Marine Park*
Alan Jeffery - Queensland Dept. of Environment and Heritage, Maryborough
- 10.00 am: Morning tea
- 10.30 am: *Management of whale and dolphin watching, Kaikoura, New Zealand*
Andrew Baxter - Dept of Conservation, New Zealand
- 11.30 am: *Marine Mammal Strandings*
Brent Vincent - Queensland Dept. of Environment and Heritage, Cairns
- 12.30 pm: Lunch
- 2.00 pm: *Whale observations from Australian Antarctic ships*
Ken Green - Australian Antarctic Division, Hobart
- 3.00 pm: Afternoon Tea
- 3.15 pm: *Assigning priorities*
Workshop session

Day 5 - 10 September

Depart Lady Elliot Island.

OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives for the conference were:

- To provide a forum for delegates to discuss mutual concerns relating to whale watching activities.
- To review the current status of education, research and management programs concerning the control of whale watching activities in Australia.
- To identify future directions for whale watching in Australia to ensure the protection of whales from harassment whilst maintaining a viable and sustainable whale watching industry.

DISCUSSION GROUP RESULTS

Major issues identified and discussed at the conference workshops under the broad categories of Research, Education and Management were:

Research:

- Need for more baseline data, population recovery is presently not assured.
- Research efforts need to have a co-ordinated approach to avoid duplication of effort and waste of resources.
- Social research needed ie. what are people learning from their experience, can this information be used to change attitudes towards whaling.
- Scientific research needs its own guidelines to avoid harassment.

Education:

- Appropriate codes of behaviour need to be developed for commercial and recreational whale watchers.
- Realistic expectations about whale watching need to be set by operators amongst their clientele.
- Need for better staff training and accurate resource material so the public is getting the right information.

Management:

- Consistency in management strategies needed between the States.
- Need to realise that education, research and management strategies are interlinked i.e. education and research are the tools of management.
- Need to look at the logic behind present regulations - 'Who thought them up?', 'Do they work?' and 'Should they be changed?'.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

Major outcomes of the conference were:

- Support from all representative organisations for the conference. As an initial networking and information sharing exercise, it was a great success.
- Identified need for ongoing resource commitment from management agencies for development of whale management programs.
- Follow up conference to be held in Hervey Bay in August 94. Q.DEH to be primary organisers.

It is now time to build on the success of this program and continue working towards strategies that, primarily, provide for the conservation of these marine mammals but also allow opportunities for their appreciation and enjoyment by the general public through the development of a sustainable whale watching industry.