

Development of an Environmental Code and Community Awareness Campaign for Whale Watchers in South Australia

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Introduction

Over the past two years, Southern Right whales have been a common sight within South Australia's Encounter Bay waters (situated about 60 kms south of Adelaide) between the months of May and October. They mate, give birth and nurse their young, often in shallow waters and quite near to the coast.

Background

In a recent whale watch season in the Encounter Coast area, it was estimated in excess of 70 000 people travelled to the region over a period of 15 days specifically to watch whales.

A local resident who normally take 15 minutes to conduct their daily business, when whales are in the area it takes 90 minutes.

Front page full colour photos and editorial on whales in the statewide South Australian press.

These examples show the impact and interest of whales that has prompted the development of whale watching community awareness campaign in South Australia, particularly for the Encounter Coast region but also relevant to anywhere land based whale activities take place.

With the large influx of visitors to the area, various environmental problems have been the result. These have included:

- Severe damage caused to cliff areas, beaches, coastal dunes and fragile vegetation by the public endeavouring to gain best vantage points to view whales.
- In many cases, a lack of respect of local residents' property - farm gates being left open, rubbish left on site and damage caused to fences and gates.
- Safety issues ignored - people endangering themselves while watching whales from cliff faces and others just not being aware of surging surf on slippery rock faces and the potential for being swept out to sea.
- Whale watchers in their enthusiasm making loud and unexpected noises, boats, planes and helicopters all trying to get the best view of these magnificent mammals.

Community awareness campaign

The South Australian Department of Environment and Land Management through the department's, Coastal Management Branch, National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Public Communications Branch have jointly coordinated the development and introduction of the community awareness campaign.

The campaign aims to minimise and where possible, eliminate environmental damage caused by persons involved in whale watching.

It resulted from input from not only government agencies including the Department of Environment and Land Management, South Australian Museum, Police Department and the South Australian Tourist Commission, but also local government organisations such as the District Councils of Port Elliot & Goolwa and Victor Harbour as well as commercial community organisations including the Whale Information Network and the Whale Watch Centre.

This forum meets regularly in the local whale region and their role is to review and discuss all aspects of the impact of whale watching to the area. The Encounter Coast region is where the most environmental damage has been caused.

The situation in South Australia is unique compared to other states in Australia. The problems encountered are generally land based. Other states generally relate to water based problems associated with whale watching. The region is in easy reach of the general community, only being 60 kms away from metropolitan Adelaide.

Various organisations are eagerly awaiting the outcome of this community education approach to controlling and eliminating the environmental problems associated with whale watching.

Campaign objectives

The objectives of the campaign are to:

- increase the level of concern by whale watchers for the fragile vegetation, cliff areas and dune systems and to increase their level of understanding of the need for environmentally sensitive behaviour,
- minimise the environmental impact caused by whale watchers, and
- promote a whale watching code specifically for the state's Encounter coast area.

The environmental awareness code proposes to:

- educate the community regarding environmental damage caused by whale watchers,
- provide positive ways to protect the coastal dune system, and
- identify specific guidelines and safety issues associated with whale watching.

Campaign Elements

Whale watchers Information kit

Included in the kit are:

- **4 Information sheets:-**

Protecting sand dunes -	how and why dunes are important to the beach system and how people can assist in protecting them.
Welcome to Whale Watching -	a general description of the environmental code.
Southern Right Whale Story -	background information and history on the Southern Right Whale.

Whale behaviour - describes the various aspects of what people can expect to see while whale watching.

- **'Encounter Coast Whale Watching Guidelines'**

These guidelines explain the limits of approaches to whales, best viewing areas, whale protection regulations and other relevant information.

- **Southern Right Whales**

This brochure is an informative biological and behavioural guide on the Southern Right Whale. It details historical background and other interesting information required by the avid whale watcher.

- **SA Museum whale report form**

This form is included for use when whales are sighted. Information gathered by the Museum is used for scientific purposes.

These kits are available for free. A distribution network has been established for easy public access. They are available from the department's Information Centre within Adelaide's central business area, the regional office on the Encounter Coast and the SA Museum shop also situated in the city.

Information display

A colourful information display has been produced for use in shopping centre displays, information centres, National parks exhibitions, school talks and other promotions. Photos of whales and purposely chosen positive images of people watching whales from beaches and walkways, complement the educational display information.

The display, of which 3 copies were produced, has already had a great deal of exposure over the past months. Adelaide's Myer Remm centre visited by over 10000 people each day, the department's city Information Centre as well as regional shopping centre displays and Whale Information Network and Whale Watch centres on the Encounter Coast.

Supporter network

A network of over 60 supporters has been established along the whole Encounter Coast from Goolwa, Middleton, Port Elliot, Victor Harbour, the Bluff around Cape Jervis to Second Valley - all well known whale watching sites.

The network includes delis, surf shops, tourist information offices, petrol stations and hotels, anywhere an unsuspecting whale watcher will congregate!

Colourful counter cards are used to distribute the code leaflets as well as for easy access and recognition by the public. The message "Essential information for whale watchers" encourages the public to take their own copy of the code and it directs them to gain further information on whale watching, if required.

Posters have been produced for display in shop windows to encourage people to go in to inquire about the code if interested.

The network of supporters have been contacted twice during the current whale watch season. Personal contact was made initially to gain support for the campaign and then by mail half way through the season.

A covering letter reinforced what the objectives of the campaign were and to thank them for their continuing support. It also gave them an opportunity to provide feedback to the department. A supply of code leaflets were also included to ensure counter card stocks were replenished.

Further contact with the network is proposed at the completion of the season. It will provide an "on the ground", honest local opinion of how the campaign has progressed.

Advertising campaign

An advertising campaign and various public relations activities have been conducted to promote the availability of the environmental code for whale watchers.

Radio and print media, used over the course of the season, ensure the general community is aware of the environmental implications of whale watching.

The media campaign encourages whale watchers to help protect the sand dune system as well as being aware of their own safety, respecting local residents' property and welcoming the whales.

Public Relation activities

Various activities arranged to generate publicity and community interest include:-

- distribution of the code leaflets through high rating local radio station's SAFM's Black Thunder promotional vehicles,
- a whales education page published in statewide print media, 'The Advertiser',
- feature support from 'The Advertiser's' environmental writers,
- interviews on ABC talk back radio segment,
- Community Service Announcements on local and regional radio,
- Community service ads have been prepared for use as filler spots in 'The Advertiser' as well as local and regional press.
- Various magazines have reviewed the campaign information including 'Wildlife Australia', 'FreeSurf Australia', 'GREENWEEK' and internationally distributed, SA tourism publication, 'The World around'. The Queensland Whale Preservation Society has also been contacted to assist in promoting the code and awareness campaign through the 'SCRIMSHAW' publication.
- The Department of Environment and Land Management jointly co-hosts an Ecotalk series in conjunction with the Adelaide University's Mawson Centre for Environmental Studies. A joint presentation on the development of the code and community education campaign was made together with SA Museum, Curator of Mammals, Dr Cath Kemper. This provided not only an ideal opportunity to recognise the technical advice given by the Museum to the development of the whale watchers kit, but to also promote the campaign to an interested audience.

National Parks Whale Information caravan

A bonus to the whale watch season in South Australia has been the introduction of a whale information caravan. The van is used when whales are sighted in the region and positioned on the site.

A variety of whale watch information is available to the public including the code and kits. Two trained information officers staff the caravan, distribute material and direct crowds, if needed.

This component is jointly funded by the two local government councils. National Parks supply the caravan and make necessary arrangements to position and staff the information van.

Whale watchers survey

A student from the Adelaide University's Mawson Graduate Centre for Environmental Studies is currently conducting a survey on whale watchers. The information gained is to be used for a thesis on the social behaviour of whale watchers.

This survey information (5 pages of questions) provides details which include where whale watchers live, how they found out about the whale sightings, how they got to the viewing site, whether they are aware of the environmental code and other watching guidelines, facilities they suggest should be provided to whale watch and a whole range of information relevant to the environmental implications and social aspects of whale watching.

An evaluation of the information gathered will enable strategic decisions to be made regarding advertising, distribution networks for whale watch information, facility improvement and if additional education programs are needed to be introduced.

Future opportunities

Sites of National Tourism Significance grant

A proposal to the Federal Government is intended for funding under the Sites of National Tourism Significance grant.

The submission will be jointly arranged through state and local government level in conjunction with community organisations such as the Whale Information Network and Whale Watch Centre.

The need for board walks, whale watching platforms, control of sand dune erosion and other works to reduce the environmental impact of tourists/whale watchers will be the major thrust of the proposal.

Intense lobbying has been conducted within the South Australian Tourist Commission to ensure the whale watching proposal is a high priority within the state's submission to Canberra.

Proposed Whale Interpretive Centre

In order to service the two main tourism markets in the region, Ecotourism and Cultural tourism, a Whale Interpretive Centre is proposed for Encounter Coast whale watch region.

The proposed centre will include an information and interpretation centre, whaling and heritage displays, a year round statewide whale watch centre together with theatre/lecture room and opportunity for retail sales through the information area.

A centre of this kind will provide a central focus for current and potential whale watchers. It also provides a opportunity to interactively communicate with the public to ensure awareness is raised and to encourage whale watchers to meet their environmental obligations.

Conclusion

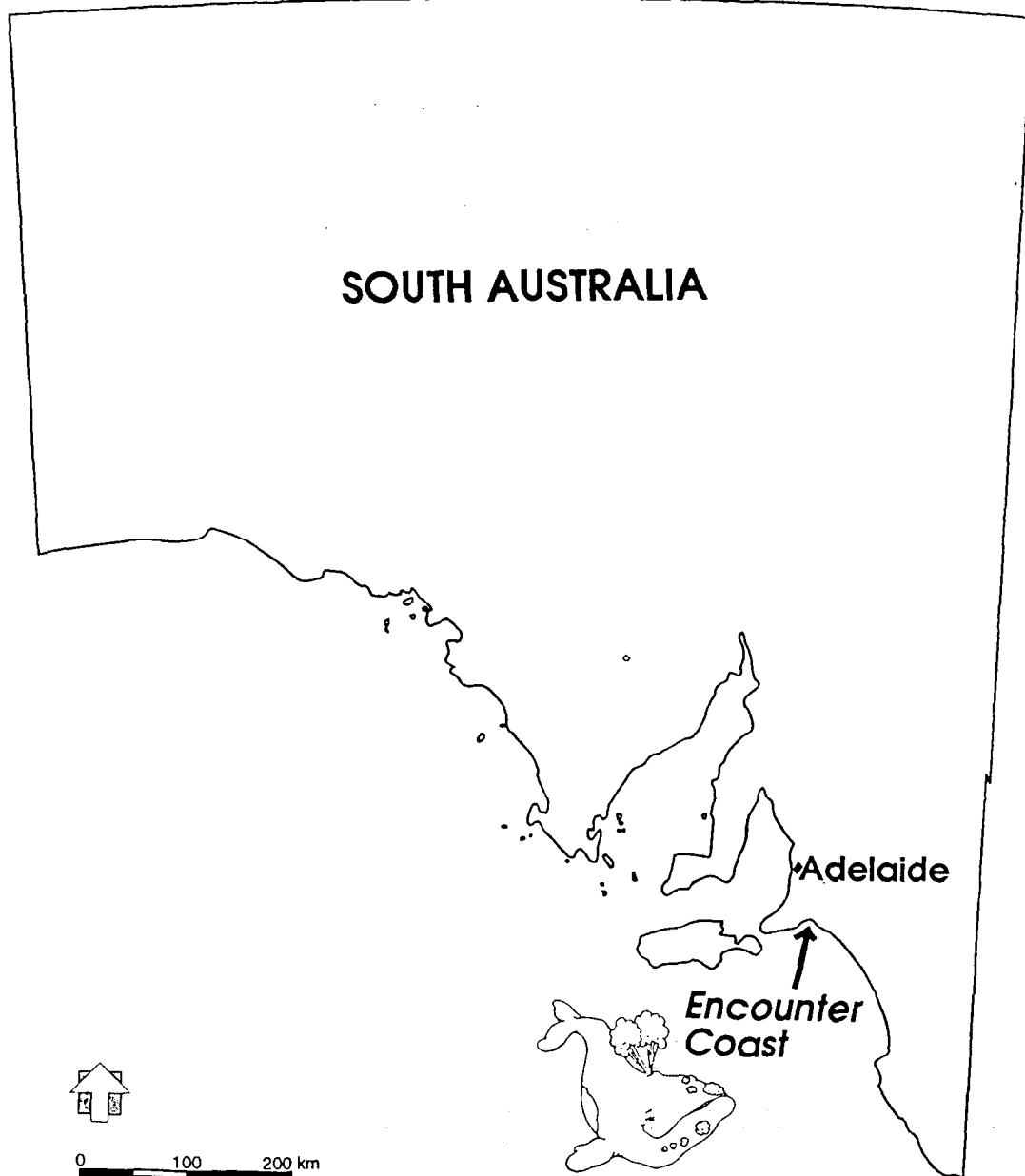
With the introduction of the community awareness campaign and promotion of the whale watchers environmental code, visitors' experiences will be enhanced. There is no intention to limit enjoyment.

The campaign aims to:

- educate the community in being aware that the coastal environment is fragile, and that we must 'tread lightly' to protect it for future generations.
- It encourages the public to be aware of their responsibility to local residents and their property.
- Most importantly by encouraging people to welcome the whales and not disturb them, it will hopefully assist in the whales staying longer in the area so even more people can enjoy and share this memorable experience.

The campaign's no frills message is -

**Do the right thing by
the coastal environment,
yourself,
the locals
and finally,
do the right thing by whales.**



Location of Encounter Coast, South Australia