



# Education on marine mammal tours – But what do tourists want to learn?



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## ABSTRACT

With continuing growth of the tourism industry over the past decades, the demand for interpretive experiences and education on marine wildlife tours has increased as well. Research showed that tourists expect an educational component on marine wildlife tours, but it remains somewhat vague what content tour participants expect. This study built on Lück's (2003) work and investigated participants on whale and dolphin tours in New Zealand with regards to the satisfaction with, and the desired educational content on these tours. Distributed questionnaires at two locations in New Zealand included closed-ended questions in Likert-type scale format, and open ended questions. Results show that tourists on whale and dolphin tours in New Zealand display high satisfaction rates, but also would like to learn more about wildlife and the sea in general. Results support the introduction of well-developed interpretation programmes on whale and dolphin tours.

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## 1. Introduction

With continuing growth of tourism over the past decades, there has also been a change in tourist behaviour. Krippendorf (1986) and Poon (1993) recognised a shift from the stereotypical 3-S (sun, sand and sex) tourist to an increasingly sophisticated and demanding tourist, who is looking for more than just relaxation. For example, tourists want to learn about history (e.g., ancient ruins in Egypt, Italy and Greece) and culture (e.g., temples in Asia, indigenous cultures in Australia and North America), as well as wildlife (e.g., safaris in Africa). With this change came the development of interpretation offerings at attractions and on tours, especially in the areas of ecotourism and wildlife tourism. According to many definitions, interpretation and education are vital parts of an ecotour (e.g., Weaver, 2001; Markwell and Weiler, 1998; Lück, 2007; Fennell, 2008).

Newsome et al. (2005) argued that wildlife tourism is a form of ecotourism that has gained a great amount of attention, and Higham and Lück (2007) noted that whale watching, originating in the 1950s in Hawaii, USA and Baja California, Mexico, is seen as the vanguard of marine wildlife tourism. Whale watching was defined by Hoyt (2001) as 'tours by boat, air or from land, formal or informal, with at least some commercial aspect, to see, swim with,

and/or listen to any of the some 83 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises' (pg. 1). It has grown faster than most tourism sectors over the past decades, and 2008 saw a total of almost 13 million whale watchers worldwide, of which 546,445 were interacting with whales and dolphins in New Zealand (O'Connor et al., 2009).

While previous research has established that interpretation and education are important components on whale and dolphin tours (Forestell and Kaufmann, 1990; Orams, 1997), and that tourists on marine mammal tours expect interpretation and education (Lück, 2003), it remains unclear what content the tour participants would like to feature on the tours. It has been argued that the content is management driven, and not based on the desires of tourists (Masberg and Savige, 1996). Based on this gap, this paper draws a demographic profile of tourists on whale and dolphin tours in New Zealand, and investigates their satisfaction with, and expectations of on-tour interpretation and learning. Using a mixed-methods approach, it then explores the educational content these tour participants desire.

## 2. Interpretation and education

As early as in 1957, in his seminal book 'Interpreting our Heritage', Tilden defined interpretation as:

an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand

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experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information (p. 8).

Although the terms interpretation and education are often used synonymously, Hammitt (1984) distinguished between the two, by stating that 'environmental education often involves a formal approach to educating while environmental interpretation is almost always informal' (p.11). Therefore, most education takes place in formal settings, and includes a captive audience, while interpretation usually takes place in informal settings, and includes a voluntary, non-captive audience (Hammitt, 1984). Townsend (2008) added that both aim to enhance the visitor experience, while at the same time reduce damage to the visited site. Cater and Cater (2007) observed that in a tourism context, education almost always takes place in a less formalised way. With the increasing recognition of the importance of interpretation programmes on (marine) wildlife tours, a number of models have been developed, in an attempt to achieve important outcomes, from visitor satisfaction to a change in tourist behaviour.

### 2.1. Interpretation models for marine wildlife tours

In the early 1990s, Forestell and Kaufman (1990) and Forestell (1991, 1993) proposed a 3-phase interpretation model for whale watching tours, including a pre-contact phase (dynamic disequilibrium), a contact phase (managing cognitive dissonance), and a post-contact phase (resolution of cognitive dissonance). Their work was the basis for Orams (1993, 1994, 1996, 1997) to further develop this model. Orams proposed an enhanced model, which is based on six major steps, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The design of Orams' interpretation programme includes theories of cognitive dissonance and the affective domain, where the interpreter creates a deliberate cognitive gap. Based on his model, an interpretation programme should begin with a variety of interesting questions, so that participants become curious and develop a cognitive dissonance between the interpreter's questions and their own knowledge. The affective domain shall then be addressed through the involvement of participants' emotions. This is achieved with stories about the animals encountered, in this case marine mammals. The next state, a state of cognitive dissonance, is meant to motivate and provide an incentive to act. Orams suggests that the interpreter should address specific environmental problems and issues, and offer solutions and/or opportunities for each participant to act.

Ideally, participants on marine mammal tours are given concrete opportunities to act during the tour (or at return to the base on shore), such as petitions to sign, signing up for membership of an environmental organisation, or products to purchase that support environmental research.

A very recent model ('McInnis model'), proposed by Johnson and McInnis (2014) is also based on the works of Forestell and Kaufman,

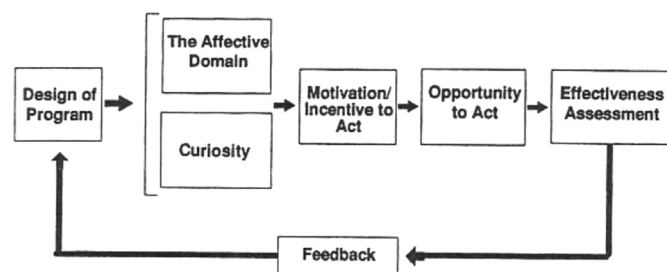


Fig. 1. Interpretation techniques (features of an effective interpretation programme). Source: (Orams, 1997, p. 297).

and Orams, and looks at five phases, from the point when a whale watching tourist makes a reservation, to the time after the whale watch tour (Fig. 2).

These authors also have the goal of a change in environmental behaviour, by stating that the model 'becomes especially important when aiming for the goal of behaviour change because we need to account for the variety of whale watching experiences as well as the unknown attitudes of our passengers.' (p. 134). Thus, in addition to the Forestell and Kaufman, and the Orams models, they add the factor 'attitudes' to their model, arguing that when a well-trained guide takes behaviour and attitudes into account, there is a better chance to achieve a behaviour change in passengers.

### 2.2. Interpretation from the tourist's perspective

The discussed models were developed to assist in the creation of effective and beneficial interpretation programmes for marine mammal tours, with the main goal of increasing environmental awareness and environmentally responsible behaviour. Lück (2003) supports the implementation of such models, based on his work on dolphin tours in New Zealand. He also critically discusses the education content presented on marine mammal tours, highlighting that some researchers argue that tourists are not interested in education when on holidays (e.g., Mc Kercher, 1993), and that they want nothing but be entertained. In contrast, MacCannell (1976) contends that tourists are looking for meaning and authenticity. Markwell and Weiler (1998) further argue that interpreted experiences help tourists, especially ecotourists, to be committed to act environmentally and ecologically friendly. However, there is still a lack of literature about what topics are of interest to the tour participants in their on-tour experience. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the content of many tours is not designed based on the desires of the tourists, but reflect the need of staff (Masberg and Savige, 1996). McArthur and Hall (1996) went a step further and stated that interpretation objectives are practiced by managers in the opposite order of importance to how they are desired by tourists. This is often explained by the desire of managers and guides to convey a conservation message, aiming at influencing attitudes and behaviour (Andersen and Miller, 2006).

In a 2009 study, Ballantyne and colleagues investigated the tourist support for conservation messages across four wildlife tour operations and attractions in Australia (turtle beach, whale watch cruises, aquarium and marine theme park). In their study, they asked respondents to what extent they agree with four statements regarding the conservation information provided to tourists. Results showed that 98% of the whale watchers agreed or strongly agreed that the experience should 'give people information about marine wildlife and marine life behaviour', 91% agreed or strongly agreed that the experience should 'give people information about conservation issues', 94% agreed or strongly agreed that it should 'give people practical information about what they can do to help protect marine life', and only 26% agreed or strongly agreed that the experience should 'let people view marine life without giving them anything but the basic facts' (Ballantyne et al., 2009). However, they only report on these four pre-determined items about conservation issues in the interpretation programme as part of a larger study.

Finally, a recent study by Hrycik and Forestell (2013) on whale watching tours in Massachusetts analysed the questions tourists on these tours asked, and defined categories based on these questions. They found that questions can be placed into the following categories: 1) biology, safety and comfort, 2) tour and itinerary, methodology, conservation, 3) geographic and anthropogenic features, and 4) retail, and personal connection. Hrycik and Forestell concluded that the type of questions varies, depending on the actual phase (pre-contact, contact, post-contact) they are being

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