



A guilty pleasure: Tourist perspectives on the ethics of feeding whale sharks in Oslob, Philippines



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ABSTRACT

This study explored the ethics of provisioning wildlife to enhance tourist interactions at a whale shark tourism site in Oslob, Philippines. TripAdvisor comments ($n = 947$) and tourist surveys ($n = 761$) were used to better understand tourists' perceptions of whale shark provisioning in Oslob. The ethical decisions made were then critically assessed using utilitarian and animal welfare ethical philosophies. The majority of respondents supported whale shark provisioning, despite many being aware of the ethical complications of provisioning sharks for tourism purposes. Respondents justified their participation in this activity using mainly economic, human enjoyment, and animal welfare arguments. A utilitarian assessment of the potential costs and benefits of this activity highlighted the gaps in our knowledge regarding the economic and social benefits of this activity, as well as the negative impacts on the sharks' welfare. Until such analyses are completed, significant ethical questions remain regarding the provisioning of these sharks.

1. Introduction

An emerging concern in marine wildlife tourism (MWT) is the ethics of tourism activities that involve the provisioning of animals. Provisioning or feeding wild animals is becoming more pervasive in MWT, especially for ray and shark diving activities (Brena, Mourier, Planes, & Clua, 2015; Burgin & Hardiman, 2015; Gallagher et al., 2015). The practice is controversial as the long-term impacts of provisioning marine wildlife remain unclear (Gallagher et al., 2015; Hammerschlag, Gallagher, Wester, Luo, & Ault, 2012; Patroni, Simpson, & Newsome, 2018). Provisioning enhances the tourism draw, since operators can guarantee close interactions with otherwise elusive wild animals (Newsome & Rodger, 2008; Orams, 2002; Patroni et al., 2018), thereby improving the economic viability of the site and providing an enhanced incentive for protection. However, there are also potential costs to the focal species and ecosystem (Burgin & Hardiman, 2015; Corcoran et al., 2013; Gallagher et al., 2015; Parsons, 2012; Rizzari, Semmens, Fox, & Huveneers, 2017). Only one study to date has assessed tourists' support for provisioning sharks or rays within MWT (Semeniuk, Haider, Beardmore, & Rothley, 2009); none have assessed tourists' ethical

perceptions of such provisioning activities, despite a need for more studies exploring the social perspective of provisioning activities (Patroni et al., 2018). The goals of the current study were to assess tourists' support of provisioning activities at a MWT site and to gain a better understanding of tourists' ethical considerations when participating in such activities. The next section provides some context on ethics within wildlife tourism. This is followed by an introduction to the case study and the specific study objectives.

1.1. Ethics in wildlife tourism

Studies assessing the ethical implications of wildlife tourism activities have only emerged in the last two decades (Fennell, 2015a). There are several ethical philosophies that can be applied to wildlife tourism interactions (see Fennell, 2015b for a review). Animal welfare is an ethical philosophy interested in the welfare of individual animals (Fennell, 2015b). Individual animals are afforded some level of moral considerability, although they are not necessarily afforded the same status as humans (Fennell, 2015b; Garrod, 2007). For example, it can be argued using this position that the harming of an individual animal

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through tourism activities is morally acceptable provided it is outweighed by benefits to humans.

Utilitarianism, on the other hand, is an ethical philosophy that requires that all costs and benefits of a given action be considered and the correct action is the one providing the greatest good to the greatest number of interests (Dobson, 2011). Although utilitarianism requires that all interests (human and animal) receive equal consideration, it does not require equal treatment; thus, humans may be given preference over animals due to their higher capacity to suffer (Dobson, 2011; Singer, 1995). Applying this theory to wildlife tourism, potential benefits of wildlife tourism include human enjoyment, education, funding for conservation, economic incentives to protect a species and or environment, scientific research, instilling a conservation ethic in participants, and community social and economic benefits (Ardoin, Wheaton, Bowers, Hunt, & Durham, 2015; Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Bentz, Dearden, Ritter, & Calado, 2014; Brooks, Waylen, & Mulder, 2013; Brunnschweiler, 2010; Camp & Fraser, 2012; Catlin, Hughes, Jones, Jones, & Campbell, 2013; Cisneros-Montemayor, Barnes-Mauthé, Al-Abdulrazzak, Navarro-Holm, & Sumaila, 2013; Clua, Buray, Legendre, Mourier, & Planes, 2011; Dobson, 2011; Filby, Stockin, & Scarpaci, 2015; Higham & Lusseau, 2007, 2008; Hill, Byrne, & Pickering, 2015; Lück, 2003; Mayes, Dyer, & Richins, 2004; Mintzer et al., 2015; Newsome, Lewis, & Moncrieff, 2004; Orams, 2002; O'Malley, Lee-Brooks, & Medd, 2013; Parsons, 2012; Pegas, Coghlan, Stronza, & Rocha, 2013; Powell & Ham, 2008; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001; Tisdell & Wilson, 2001; Topelko & Dearden, 2005; Vianna, Meekan, Pannell, Marsh, & Meeuwig, 2012; Waylen, McGowan, & Milner-Gulland, 2009; Wilson & Tisdell, 2003). The costs of wildlife tourism activities include negative impacts on the focal species, other wildlife, tourists, and potentially the local community (Archer, Cooper, & Ruhanen, 2005; Burgin & Hardiman, 2015; Dubois & Fraser, 2013; Gallagher et al., 2015; Higham, Bejder, Allen, Corkeron, & Lusseau, 2016; Parsons, 2012; Patroni et al., 2018; Rizzari et al., 2017; Walpole & Goodwin, 2001). Using a utilitarian approach, one could argue that a MWT activity with legitimate conservation outputs (e.g., money from ticket sales is used to create a marine protected area for the focal species), but poor animal welfare conditions, is acceptable (Dobson, 2011; Moorhouse, D'Cruze, & MacDonald, 2017) since "it produces or intends to produce at least as great a balance of good over bad" (Fennell, 2015b, p. 33). Tourism activities in which none of the revenue is invested in conservation, animal welfare, or local communities, would be considered an exploitation of the focal species for profit (Moorhouse et al., 2017).

Moorhouse, Dahlsjö, Baker, D'Cruze, and Macdonald (2015) assessed the impacts of twenty-four wildlife tourism attractions on animal welfare and conservation and compared these results to tourists' feedback on TripAdvisor. The authors found that six tourism attractions had a net positive impact, while the rest had net negative conservation and/or welfare impacts; however, only 7.8% of all tourist feedback on these activities was negative due to conservation or animal welfare concerns. The authors concluded that millions of tourists are participating in wildlife tourism activities that are detrimental to the animals involved but only a small percentage of tourists realize it and/or care (Moorhouse et al., 2015).

In the absence of any standardised global wildlife welfare laws or standards of practice for wildlife tourism attractions (Patroni et al., 2018), tourist dollars become the ultimate judge of what constitutes acceptable use of animals at wildlife tourism sites, and thus animal welfare standards become subject to market forces (Moorhouse et al., 2017). If tourists have a negative experience and tell other potential tourists, it is possible that tourism numbers and revenue will decline leading to improved ethical standards or the closing of the site (Moorhouse et al., 2017). However, such feedback would not occur if tourists could not perceive negative welfare impacts, could not communicate their concern to others, or if they felt that the poor welfare conditions did not sufficiently detract from their enjoyment of the

tourism attraction (Moorhouse et al., 2017). For example, Moorhouse et al. (2015) found that only a minority of tourists were aware of welfare issues at tourism sites; even attractions with the worst animal welfare conditions had over 80% positive reviews on TripAdvisor.

In some cases, tourists are simply ignorant of any ethical issues of a given wildlife tourism activity and therefore are not making a moral decision (Moorhouse et al., 2017). A number of studies, however, have shown that unethical behaviour is often due to behaviours people do not recognize as unethical due to "systematic and predictable ethical blind spots" (i.e., "bounded ethicality"; Sezer, Gino, & Bazerman, 2015, p. 77). One such blind spot occurs due to tension between the "want self" and the "should self" – i.e., between the side that wants instant gratification and the side that wants to make ethical decisions (Sezer et al., 2015). In this case, people think they will behave more ethically in accordance with their "should self" before making a decision, but when it actually comes time to make that decision, the "want self" takes over (Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010). Termed "ethical fading", this occurs because the immediate reward from the unethical behaviour becomes much more important in the moment and the ethical implications much less so (Sezer et al., 2015; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Once the decision is made, however, the ethical implications come back to the forefront as the "should self" re-emerges and people attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance stemming from the contradiction between their values and their actions (Sezer et al., 2015) by avoiding or disguising the moral implications of their actions (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) or by downplaying the consequences or justifying their actions (Curtin & Wilkes, 2007; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014; Juvan, Ring, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2016). For example, Curtin (2006) and Curtin and Wilkes (2007) assessed the ethical perceptions of tourists who swam with dolphins, both in the wild and in captivity. They found that both groups enjoyed the experience; however, those who swam with wild dolphins had a greater ethical concern for dolphins kept in captivity, while those who swam with captive dolphins exhibited cognitive dissonance. The latter group alleviated their cognitive dissonance by focusing on the positives of the experience and denying the negatives (e.g., the dolphins looked happy, better than circus shows; Curtin, 2006; Curtin & Wilkes, 2007). Shani (2009), meanwhile, examined the ethical perceptions of tourists who visited various captive wildlife tourism attractions (aquaria, zoos, safari or wildlife parks, animal theme parks, rodeos, bullfights, animal circus, animal racing) and found that tourists alleviated their cognitive dissonance by increasing their level of agreement with various justifications for a given attraction's existence. For example, a belief that captive animals were better off than animals in the wild may reduce the cognitive dissonance of watching wild animals perform unnatural tricks (Shani, 2009).

Moorhouse et al. (2017) identified three main reasons why tourists may be particularly susceptible to ethical blind spots when participating in wildlife tourism activities. First, tourists have a desire to escape from everyday life while on holiday and therefore may not apply the same ethical considerations in making decisions while on vacation that they would at home (e.g., Barr, Shaw, Coles, & Prillwitz, 2010; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2017; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Second, tourists may not understand nor be able to assess the negative impacts their participation in a given tourism activity can have on the focal species' welfare and may assume that a given attraction would not be able to operate if it were unethical (Moorhouse et al., 2017). Third, they may feel reassured that a given activity is morally acceptable due to the large number of people present at some of these wildlife tourism attractions (Gino & Galinsky, 2012; Moorhouse et al., 2017).

1.2. Study objectives

In the last five years, a handful of sites in the Philippines and Indonesia have started provisioning whale sharks to facilitate tourist interactions (Thomson et al., 2017). Whale shark tourism is viewed as a

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