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Wildlife-Watching in Marine Environments

If one looks at destination guide books from as late as the 1990s, very few would have had much to say about watching marine wildlife, except perhaps a few sentences about scuba-diving and the opportunity it gave the tourist to see interesting and beautiful fish as an added bonus for participating in this leisure activity. Otherwise, the tourist may have been recommended to visit a certain place because of the opportunities to fish for huge specimens that could be displayed as trophies and photographed to impress the folks back home. Yet, a few years later, marine wildlife-watching has become a major selling point for many coastal destinations around the world, from Australia to California, Sri Lanka to Alaska, South Africa to Scotland.

Interestingly, it is also an activity, out of all of the ways in which tourism and the marine environment interacts, that has attracted perhaps the most attention by tourism researchers. In this chapter we will look at how and why this change occurred together with a look at the impacts of the rise of marine wildlife-watching in its many forms.

However, first we need to be clear what we are talking about by looking at several typologies of marine wildlife-watching.

Typologies of marine wildlife-watching

There are several ways of looking at marine wildlife-watching and some of these are illustrated below in diagrammatic form, starting with an attempt to segment the marine wildlife-watching market in Figure 4.1.

On the right-hand side of the diagram it is reasonable to assume that the availability of wildlife-watching experiences will not play a role in the choice of destination whereas in the case of the left-hand side these opportunities will have been a major factor in the choice in the selection of the vacation destination.

In 2010 Catlin and Jones published a longitudinal study of whale shark watching in Ningaloo Marine Park in Western Australia that compared the market

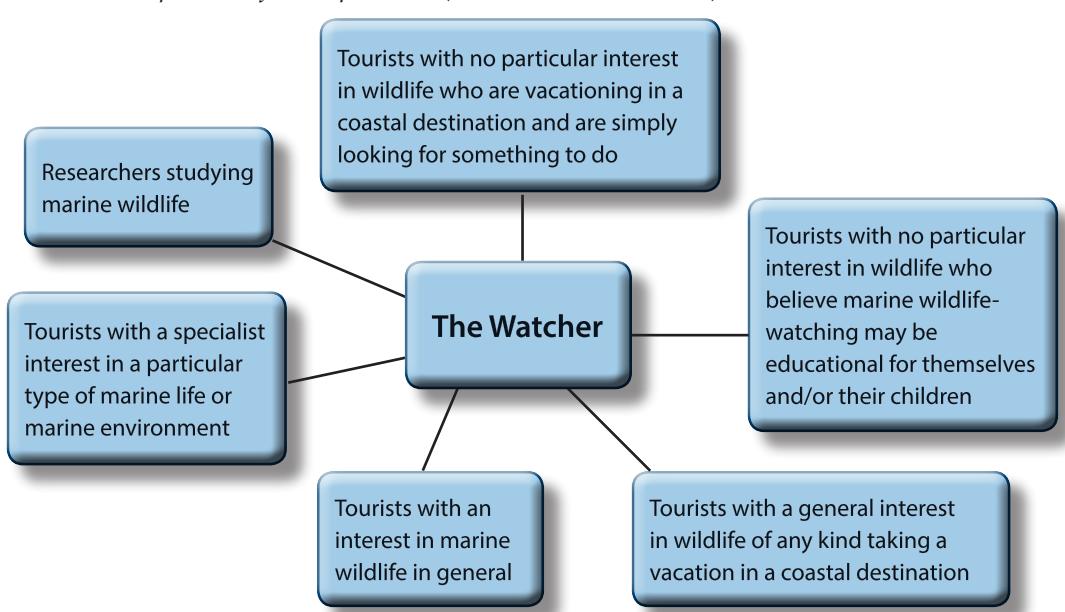


Figure 4.1: Who are the marine wildlife-watchers

Figure 4.2 focuses upon the types of wildlife that are being watched; these are more diverse than one might imagine.

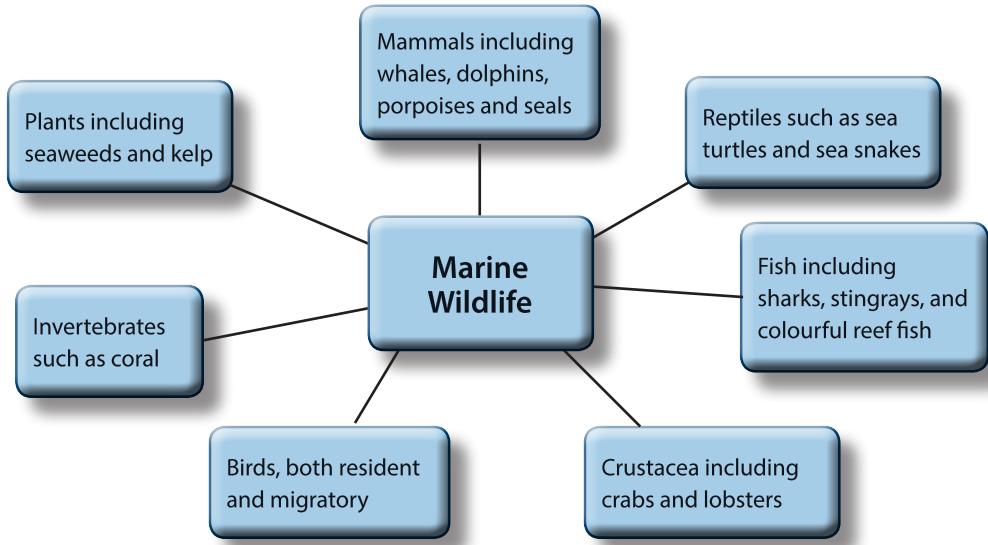


Figure 4.2: What marine wildlife is being watched?

in 1995 and 2005. They said their findings showed a shift in the industry to the mainstream from the periphery. In comparison with the past, shark tourism there now attracts more generalist tourists. There is now a greater distribution of age groups, less skilled individuals, a higher tolerance of crowding, and a larger focus on the non-wildlife components of the experience. (Catlin and Jones, 2010)

Of course, it is important to recognise that as we noted in Figure 4.1, some tourists are interested in one particular type of marine wildlife while others find all marine wildlife of interest.

When considering the impact of wildlife-watching one issue that needs to be considered is the degree of interaction that takes place between the wildlife and the watcher. This is presented in Figure 4.3 in the form of a continuum. Worryingly, but perhaps not surprisingly in the era of experiential tourism, it is the extreme form of interaction shown at the far right that is probably growing fastest. It is seen by some tourists as a form of co-creation involving the voluntary and even enthusiastic participation of the marine creature.

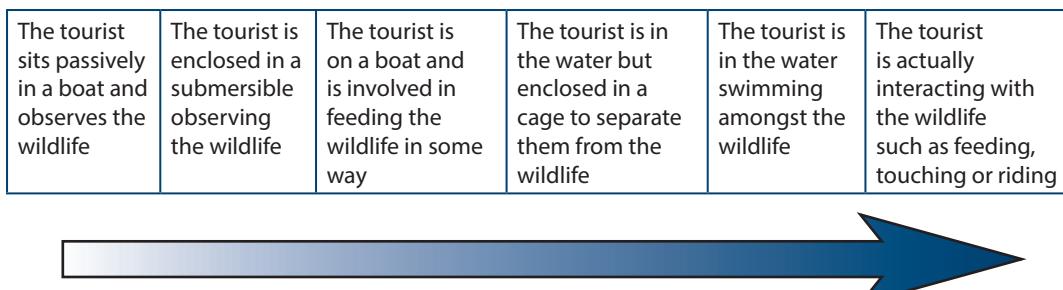


Figure 4.3: What is the level of interaction between the watcher and the marine wildlife?

In Figure 4.4 we look at the diversity of marine wildlife-watching based on the duration of the experience, again in the form of a continuum. It is clear that the duration of the experience varies significantly but as yet there appears to be a well-developed body of evidence to show if the actual duration has any real effect on the impact of wildlife-watching on the marine environment.

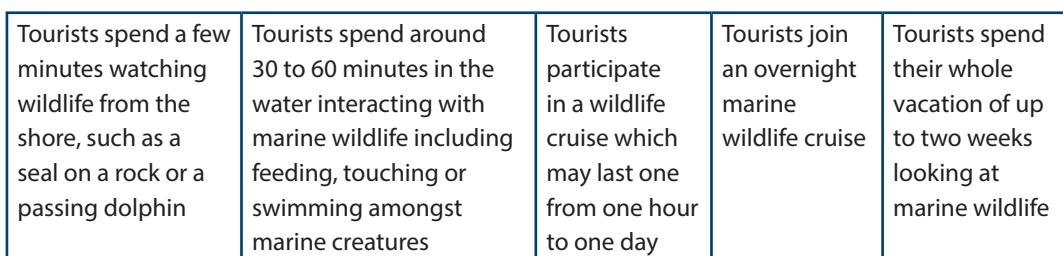


Figure 4.4: What is the duration of the wildlife-watching experience?

Finally, Figure 4.5 looks at where the wildlife watching takes place in our oceans. Unfortunately, it is impossible to find global data to show which parts of the marine environment are used most for wildlife-watching, statistically speaking.