

Wisewhale guideline

Whale watching has become a significant component of global tourism, contributing substantially to local economies. As of 2009, approximately 13 million tourists participated in whale watching activities worldwide, generating an estimated \$2.1 billion in revenue and supporting around 13,000 jobs across 119 countries.

It is plausible that the global whale watching industry has experienced further growth since then.

However, the rapid growth of whale watching tourism requires responsible practices to ensure the well-being of whale populations.

Implementing sustainable whale watching practices is crucial for preserving marine ecosystems and ensuring the long-term viability of the tourism industry.

In the end, the ultimate question is: why do we engage in whale watching? After all, our mere presence affects the animals. If we choose to do this, we must do it in the best possible way, minimising our impact and interfering as little as possible with the animals behaviour and their natural habitat.

If we approach this responsibly and base our actions on data—adhering to rules designed to minimize our impact—bringing people to witness the beauty of these animals in their natural habitat can have a positive effect. Experiencing their way of life firsthand can inspire individuals to adopt small, meaningful behaviors that support their conservation. Moreover, it can discourage visits to captive facilities, fostering a greater appreciation for observing these magnificent creatures where they truly belong.

I believe that many of our harmful behaviours stem from ignorance. Ignorance simply means not knowing or not understanding. But when we learn and truly understand how things work, that's when we can fall in love with them. If we gain knowledge and appreciation of

these animals' lives, we can develop a deep connection with them. And once we do, we will be willing to do whatever we can—through even the smallest actions—to protect and preserve them.

1. What is “best practice”

Best practices for whale and dolphin watching involve guidelines, ethics, and principles that ensure the activity is conducted responsibly. They aim to minimize negative impacts on cetaceans and the environment, enhance customer satisfaction, and provide positive benefits to local communities.

For tour operators, best practices include adopting precautionary boat handling and strictly following regulations to reduce disturbances to the animals. It is essential to minimize both the short- and long-term impacts of whale and dolphin watching on cetacean populations.

Poorly managed tourism can harm cetacean populations:

Disruption of critical behaviours. Disturbances can force cetaceans away from essential activities like feeding, resting, and socialising. Over time, this can reduce reproductive success, calf survival rates, and overall fitness.

Population displacement. When tourism pressure outweighs the benefits of staying in a habitat, cetaceans may abandon the area. This could force them into less ideal environments with lower food availability, increasing stress and energy expenditure.

Physical injuries or deaths from boat strikes. Increasing numbers of unregulated tourism boats, high-speed travel, and erratic maneuvering put cetaceans at risk. In some cases, whales and dolphins become habituated to boats, reducing their natural avoidance behaviors and making them more vulnerable to collisions.

In recent years, various institutions have introduced guidelines and regulations to address these concerns. However, research continues to highlight the negative effects of commercial whale and dolphin watching in certain locations. While some regions have successfully implemented government regulations or voluntary codes of conduct, results have varied.

Ultimately, best practices serve as a crucial tool to mitigate these impacts and ensure the sustainability of cetacean watching. By following these recommendations, the activity can remain environmentally responsible, safe for both animals and participants, and beneficial to local economies, while maximising its educational, economic and recreational benefits.

It is important to:

- **Respect Distance:** Maintaining a safe distance from the whales is crucial to avoid disturbing their natural behaviour. Guidelines often recommend staying at least 100 meters away from whales, depending on local regulations.
- **Minimise Noise:** Excessive noise from boats or other activities can disturb whales and interfere with their communication, feeding, and navigation. Whale watching tours are encouraged to use quieter boats and minimise noise.
- **Avoid Harassment:** It's important not to chase, surround, or attempt to touch the whales. Disturbing the animals in this way can stress them out and disrupt their natural behaviours.
- **Following Local Regulations:** Different countries or regions may have specific laws in place for whale watching, including limits on the number of boats allowed near whales, the times when whale watching is permitted, or the types of boats that can be used.

- **Education and Awareness:** Providing guests with information about whale species, their behaviour, and conservation efforts helps increase awareness and appreciation for the animals. Educating tourists on responsible whale watching can foster a greater understanding of the importance of protecting marine life. In addition, using sustainable and environmentally friendly practices during whale watching, such as using eco-friendly vessels or limiting the use of fuel, helps reduce the environmental impact of the activity.

These are our suggestions about approaching and observation during whale watching activities. It is a blend of leadership methods from various countries around the world and what we at Wisewhale believe to be the right way.

2. Approach

1. Cetaceans should always be approached from the side and slightly behind, with the boat moving in parallel. Cetaceans should never be approached directly from behind or in front.
2. ALWAYS approach and depart from the side, moving parallel to their direction of the animal's travel.
3. Do not approach a marine mammal to feed it, swim/interact with it, move it or entice it to move from its immediate vicinity, separate it from members of its group, or trap it between a vessel and the shore or between vessels.
4. BE CAUTIOUS, COURTEOUS and QUIET when around areas of known or suspected marine wildlife activity.
5. LOOK in all directions before planning your approach or departure from viewing wildlife.
6. Boats must switch off echo sounders within 300 metres of a cetacean, if it is safe to do so.

7. Once within 300 metres of a cetacean, boat speed should be reduced to a no wake speed, avoiding gear changes and any sudden changes of speed or direction within this vicinity, except in cases of emergency.
8. Slow down. Speed should not be more than 7 knots when within 200 metres of the whale.
9. Boats should not approach a whale closer than 100 metres and should not approach a dolphin or porpoise closer than 50 metres.
10. Do not approach closer than 200 metres away from all whales, porpoises and dolphins when in resting position or with a calf.
11. If a cetacean approaches closer than 100m to a boat, engines should be put in neutral.

3. Observation

1. Length of observation limited to 20 minutes, 15 minutes if other boats are waiting. These will reduce the cumulative impact of all vessels and give consideration to other viewers.
2. When the observation is finished or whenever cetaceans show signs of distress the vessel must exit the approaching area using the sector behind the animals; it is advisable to wait a little for the animal to have left the area, either by swimming away or diving, and if necessary, circling away from the diving spot to avoid any risk of collision.
3. When more than one vessel is within the approaching area, the following rules must be obeyed:
 - No more than 3 boats are allowed in an area within a radius of 100 meters around a cetacean or a group of cetaceans;
 - Boats must be parallel to each other and positioned in an area 60 degree behind the cetaceans;

- Approaching manoeuvres must be coordinated via radio by the first vessel entering the approaching area in order to reduce the impact on the cetaceans behaviour.
- 4. Avoid direction and heading changes.
- 5. Do not exceed the speed of cetaceans.
- 6. Maintain a parallel course, slightly behind the animals, so they may keep a 180 degrees angle free ahead of them.
- 7. Avoid noises in the proximity of the animals that may disturb or attract them.
- 8. Whenever the animals show signs of disturbance, the boats should move beyond the observation area, behind the animals
- 9. No deliberate chasing of cetaceans by boats. Boats must ensure that cetaceans have right of way, either choosing to engage with or to ignore the presence of the boat.
- 10. Platforms of observation: It is forbidden to use aircrafts, jet skis or any kind of underwater motorised vehicles as a platform of observation (exceptions may be allowed for research projects or audio-visual recordings)
- 11. The practice of manoeuvring ahead of a cetacean and stopping in its path in an attempt to intercept and solicit an interaction is forbidden.
- 12. Operators should not enter restricted zones or areas protected from boats or swimmers as designated by local, national, or international law, conventions or agreements.
- 13. No boat shall cause any cetacean to become separated from a group or cause any members of such a group to be scattered.
- 14. The practice of taking a motor-powered boat and driving in circles around dolphins in order to encourage them to bow ride is forbidden.

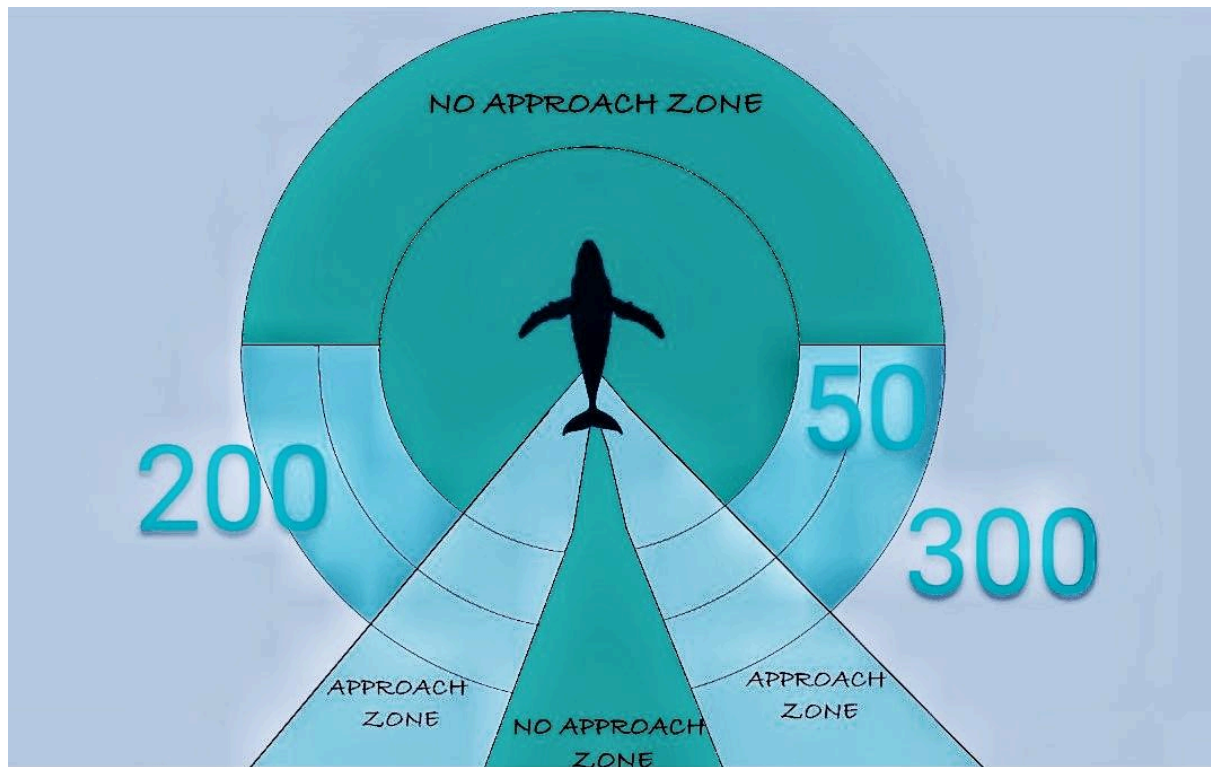
15. If a cetacean shows avoidance behaviour, it must not be pursued. Pay attention and move away, slowly and cautiously at the first sign of disturbance or agitation from any animals.
16. STAY on the OFFSHORE side of the whales when traveling close to shore.
17. ALWAYS avoid going through groups of porpoises or dolphins and hold course and reduce speed gradually to discourage bow or stern-riding. If dolphins or porpoises bow-ride alongside the boat, the boat should remain at a constant speed with no sudden changes in direction.
18. DO NOT disturb, swim with, move, feed or touch any marine wildlife. If you are concerned about a potentially sick, stranded animal, or entangled animal, contact your local stranding network.
19. The operator should not return to the same cetaceans during the same trip to sea.
20. The operator must attempt to visit different cetaceans on each trip to sea during one day.
21. Extra caution needs to be taken by the operator when calves are present. These are especially vulnerable and sensitive individuals and should therefore be approached with increased care and sensitivity.

Cetacean calves are particularly vulnerable to external factors and during this stage of life they rely heavily on their mother for food and protection. It is suggested that a variety of mechanisms may, singularly or in combination, have negative impacts, including:

Reduced resting time when nursing is most likely to occur;

Increased risk of predation through mother and calf separation;

Decreased calf health due to increased energy expenditure as a result of avoidance behaviours.



4. Customers

Customers should be well briefed in advance, using materials to gain an understanding of:

- The potential impacts of the tour on cetaceans and the marine environment;
- The importance of guidelines and how they are adhered to;
- A health and safety briefing;
- An understanding of what to expect from all aspects of the activity.

Operators must ensure that each boat has a knowledgeable guide on board.

A good guide will increase customer appreciation and understanding of the animals and their environment, help ensure compliance with guidelines, and be the trusted point of communication for passengers.

Guides play a vital role on any responsible whale and dolphin watching trip. A knowledgeable guide has the ability to positively influence the success of a trip, managing customer expectations at all times on the trip;

Having a guide means having someone with a solid understanding of cetacean behaviors. This expertise allows them to interpret the animals' responses to the whale-watching activity and adjust their actions accordingly.

5. Cetacean Behaviour

Understanding and interpreting cetacean behavior is essential for conducting responsible and ethical whale and dolphin watching tours.

These marine mammals exhibit a wide range of behaviours, each with different meanings depending on their activity. Recognising these signals allows operators to respond appropriately, minimising disturbance and ensuring a respectful approach.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of behaviours that tour operators should be able to identify from a boat:

Behavioural States of Cetaceans:

1. Traveling - Consistent, directional movement along a specific path, with relatively short and constant dive intervals.
2. Feeding - Characterized by erratic surface movements, multi-directional diving, coordinated deep diving, fish chasing, rapid

circle swimming, prey leaping, seabirds diving, or large predatory fish hunting alongside cetaceans.

3. Resting - Low activity levels with slow, predictable surfacing. Cetaceans rest in tight groups (less than one body length apart) and show little forward propulsion.

4. Socializing - Includes behaviors such as chasing, copulating, rubbing, playing, and other physical interactions. Aerial behaviors like breaching and tail slapping are often observed.

5. Milling - Non-directional movement with frequent changes in bearing. Dolphins surface facing different directions without making noticeable headway.

Signs of Stress or Aggression in Dolphins:

Jaw clapping

Open jaw display

Tail slapping

Fast, direct swimming toward swimmers

S-shaped body posture

Signs of Stress or Aggression in Whales:

Sudden changes in swimming speed or direction

Altered breathing or diving patterns

Stopping or shifting activity

Changes in group size or cohesion

Disruptions in vocal communication

Tail or flipper slapping, trumpet blows

Extended dive times compared to surface intervals

Mothers shielding their calves.

6. Best Practices for Whale and Dolphin Watching Management

Best practice for whale watching can be reached also with different kind of management:

1. Self-Regulation

Sustainability can only be achieved if all operators at a site commit to responsible practices. A single ethical operator cannot counterbalance the impact of multiple irresponsible ones.

Collaboration among tour operators, conservationists, NGOs, academic institutions, and government agencies is essential for monitoring and improving best practices. Research should guide management strategies based on the social, economic, and environmental carrying capacity of each location.

Self-regulation is one of the most cost-effective ways to enforce ethical guidelines. This requires:

- Open communication and mutual respect between operators

- Acknowledgment of shared responsibility for marine conservation

- Regular meetings or associations where operators discuss issues and agree on standards

2. Licensing System

For many places, ensuring that whale watching can only be undertaken by a limited number of permitted (licensed) operators is the essential first step to sustainable management. A well-regulated licensing system ensures only a limited number of operators can conduct tours, reducing pressure on cetacean populations. Licensing should be based on scientific assessments of carrying capacity, determined through ongoing research and stakeholder engagement.

Sustainable licensing models include:

- Operators must provide evidence of their high standard of responsible whale and dolphin watching in order to successfully obtain a permit and demonstrate adherence to responsible practices.

- Permits should be renewed periodically (e.g., every five years), with operators providing evidence of ethical behaviour, collaboration with researchers, workforce equality, and participation in education programs.

Regular monitoring of licensed operators ensures compliance, with costs covered through permit fees or passenger taxes.

3. Time-Area Closures & Zoning

Protecting cetaceans requires designated no-disturbance periods and zones, which it means allowing periods of time or areas where cetaceans cannot be disturbed, based on scientific knowledge of local species. Management strategies include:

1. Time Restrictions - Prohibiting cetacean tourism during biologically sensitive periods (e.g., foraging, resting).
2. Exclusion Zones - Restricting access to vulnerable areas where cetaceans may be particularly vulnerable to disturbance such as nursery or resting areas.
3. Zoning - Assigning specific areas to different operators to reduce congestion and minimise cumulative impact.

7. The Swimming dilemma

Although dolphins are social and curious creatures, direct human interaction can disrupt their natural behaviours. A swimmer immersed in their habitat is a foreign and unfamiliar object that needs to be investigated. By trying to seek out their attention, you are disrupting their natural behaviour and forcing them to abandon their current activities such as resting, feeding and socialising.

Allowing people to swim with dolphins unsettles the dolphins and can disrupt the animals' natural behaviours, reducing the time they spend socialising, resting and feeding.

It can cause stress and separation between mother dolphins and their calves.

It may lead to habituation, increasing risks of negative human encounters.

A study observed that dolphin resting time decreased by nearly 40% in areas where swimming was allowed, with socialising and foraging dropping by 19% and 10%, respectively.

I have been debating whether it's good or bad for a long time. The only way to do the swimming is responsibly and we all know how hard that is. As it is becoming more and more popular it can be tricky to do it well and most of the time it's a selfish move on humans behalf and it has no benefit whatsoever for the animals.

It is indeed one of the most magnificent experiences and sights one can witness and maybe with the right and strict regulation and control over them, could be done. The issue as always is when, since it can be a money machine, we put our greediness on top of everything else and that is a pity because seeing these animals underwater would open doors that allow us to understand their life.

The majority of encounters with whales and dolphins occur at the surface. As a result, most of the knowledge gathered over the years has been based solely on surface behavior. However, what we observe at the surface represents only a small fraction of a whale's life. I often compare it to the iceberg metaphor: not only is the visible portion of these animals just 10% of their bodies, but the range of behaviors we witness is also extremely limited.

Swimming with these animals offers a completely new perspective on their lives. It allows us to observe them resting, eating, singing, interacting, and socializing. We can better understand group compositions and, most importantly, witness their graceful movements in the vast ocean. This firsthand insight, combined with surface observations, provides a more comprehensive understanding of their behavior.

Data collected underwater, even if limited to photographic evidence, can serve as a valuable resource, contributing significantly to our knowledge of these remarkable creatures.

Conclusion

We all are professional whale watching guides, so of course we believe in our work. We firmly think that this activity, sharing knowledge about these animals and showing them to the people in their environment is the key. I always say if you fall in love with them you will help to preserve them. When done responsibly, whale and dolphin watching can be a meaningful and educational experience while ensuring the long-term survival of these incredible creatures and it can be a powerful conservation tool, bringing tourists understanding of conservation issues and developing empathy toward marine life.

Additionally, cetacean tourism can directly contribute to scientific research. Many operators collect photographic identification data, and some provide platforms for researchers on board. The rise of citizen science projects—such as Happywhale—has enabled tourists to assist researchers in tracking and studying marine mammals. These efforts have led to numerous scientific publications on the ecological, economic, and social impacts of whale watching.