

THE UNREGULATED GROWTH OF HUMPBACK WHALE WATCHING IN NEW CALEDONIA: WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, whale and dolphin watching activities have known an important growth worldwide (Hoyt, 2001). In the South Pacific, this industry has been booming with an average increase in numbers of 45% per year since 1998 (Economists @ Large & Associates, 2008). Humpback whales play an important role in this development; their presence in Oceania during winter months attracting thousands of tourists every year (Schaffar and Garrigue, 2007). In New Caledonia, humpback whale watching started in 1995 and focuses on the whale's main reproductive area in the southern lagoon of the island, recently listed as a World Heritage site. Today, although managed through a code of conduct and active surveillance of the area, these activities remain unregulated. Using questionnaires, interviews, and field surveys, the growth of humpback whale watching activities in New Caledonia between 1995 and 2008 was assessed. In 1995, only four commercial tour operators offered 19 whale watching trips for 129 passengers. These numbers have been growing consistently ever since and in 2008, 26 boats undertook 360 humpback whale watching trips, carrying approximately 4425 passengers. This represents an average growth of 39.9% per year since 1995. With only a small number of humpback whales visiting the southern lagoon of New Caledonia every year, these activities are likely to have reached maximum carrying capacity. Such an unregulated growth combined with a high level of exposure of humpback whales to whale watching boats (Schaffar and Garrigue, 2008), underline the urgent need for further management measures.

Keywords: whale watching, sustainability, growth, management.

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