

Environmentalism and On-Tour Experiences of Tourists on Wildlife Watch Tours in New Zealand: A Study of Visitors Watching and/or Swimming with Wild Dolphins

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the demand for nature-based tourism increased drastically, with a particular high demand in wildlife tours. Whale watching, as a particular form of wildlife tourism, experienced rapid growth. The emergence of this new 'industry' and the enormous numbers of participants brought with it increasing concern about the pressure put on the cetaceans being watched. A variety of research projects addressed the impacts of whale watching (including dolphin watching) on the marine mammals, but there is still a lack of knowledge about the participants on those tours. While whale watchers received more attention in academic research, only one study could be found that investigated participants on dolphin tours. Recognising this knowledge void, it is important to contribute to the existing body of knowledge with a special emphasis on the environmental concern and the on-tour experience on dolphin tours. The abundance of dolphin tour operations on both of New Zealand's main islands further supported the need for more information about the individuals who are participating in those tours.

This programme of research set out to gain a better understanding of participants on dolphin tours in New Zealand. In particular, their environmental values, attitudes, and behaviour were examined, and how those relate to the experience on the dolphin tour. A demographic profile built the basis for these analyses. The New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) scale, the Environmental Concern (EC) scale, and the General Measure of Ecological Behavior (GEB) were investigated and implemented. As factors contributing to the visitor experience, interpretation and education on the tours, tourist satisfaction, and perceived crowding were addressed. Finally, the NEP scale was singled out and investigated regarding its usefulness in a tourism context.

The methodology included a thorough literature review, questionnaires, personal communication with tour staff, and observational data. The questionnaires were distributed to participants on swim-with-dolphins tours at three New Zealand locations during the shoulder season 2000.

Results indicate that tourists on dolphin tours generally hold high environmental values and attitudes. The environmental behaviour is not equally high, though. Demographics have very little influence on both the environmental consciousness, and the on-tour experience. Regarding the NEP scale, it is suggested that the scale is a reliable and valid instrument to measure environmental; however, in a nature and wildlife based tourism context, the scale seems to be of limited use.

The on-tour experience was investigated with special emphasis on interpretation and education on dolphin tours, crowding, and satisfaction in general. Results show that overall, satisfaction on the dolphin tours is very high. The majority of respondents agreed that environmental education is important and expect comprehensive interpretation on the tour. It was suggested that the tour staff have good knowledge about the dolphins, but that respondents would have liked to receive more information. This underlines the demand of previous research for comprehensive interpretational

programmes on such tours. Crowding is a minor problem and does not seem to influence the experience.