

PhD Dissertation
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Title: A socio-economic and management evaluation of whale-watching in Samaná, Dominican Republic

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ABSTRACT

Pollution, global climate change and habitat degradation increase the rate of marine mammal disturbance and mortality. Coastal marine mammals are particularly vulnerable due to their proximity to human water activities. This includes whale-watching. Although commercial whale-watching began in 1955, it was not until recently that protection of the whales being watched has become a priority. Worldwide whale-watching guidelines have been evaluated with low compliance levels. As these guidelines often go unheeded, there is a constant need for the evaluation of whale-watching practices. This is particularly important in Samaná, Dominican Republic where they are economically dependent on whale-watching. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whale-watching practices and guidelines in Samaná, Dominican Republic. Whale-watching was established in Samaná in 1986; however, whale-watching guidelines were not created until 1996. These guidelines included the creation of a co-management system to oversee whale-watching. This system's effectiveness has not been evaluated in over 10 years. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate socio-economic and management concerns. Stakeholder knowledge regarding the local whale populations and whale-watching management was collected using a paper based survey with 35 closed ended questions. A preliminary evaluation of compliance of whale-watching guidelines was undertaken. Both time and distance to whales was evaluated using boat based observations and compared to current regulations. The human-wildlife conflict present in the whale-watching co-management system was evaluated using an analytical model that suggests three levels of conflict and potential resolutions. Finally tourists' opinions and knowledge as well as whale-watching preferences were evaluated in a paper based survey which included choice modeling. Overall it was found that there is a need for a more inclusive management process that allows for conflict mitigation. Furthermore stricter enforcement of whale-watching regulations is needed as compliance to time and distance regulations were found to be low. With a better understanding of how to promote marine conservation in Samaná this study hopes to encourage compliance with whale-watching guidelines, promote tourists' pro-environmental behavior and ensure marine mammal conservation in Samaná.