

Name: Katheryn Patterson

Defense date: April 21, 2010

Title: Conservation, Captivity, and Whaling: A Survey of Belize Whale-Watching Tourist Attitudes to Cetacean Conservation Issues

Thesis Director: Dr. E.C.M. Parsons

Committee: Dr. Richard Kraus, Dr. Gregory Guagnano

### Abstract

With whale watching activities and associated expenditures increasing annually, governments in coastal countries possess a large vested interest in the continued growth and protection of whale populations and the associated tourism. In 2007 and 2008, a survey investigating whale watching tourists' attitudes to key cetacean conservation issues, such as legislative protection, whaling, and captivity, was administered to volunteer participants at Blackbird Caye, Turneffe Atoll, Belize (n=166). With regards to attitudes towards cetacean conservation issues, the majority of participants considered dolphins and whales to be under protected or ONLY slightly protected (37.1% and 45.3% respectively) and expressed that marine mammal conservation laws and policies were very important (83.1%). In addition, 94.4% of participants expressed opposition against the hunting of whales (68.3% strongly opposed and 26.1% opposed), and the majority of participants were against keeping dolphins in captivity no matter if the dolphins were kept in a dolphinarium or a SEMI-natural habitat confined by nets (75.4% and 66.0% respectively). Furthermore, 91.9% of participants stated that they preferred to observe dolphins in the wild rather than in a captive setting, whether semi-natural or a dolphinarium. In addition to allowing a comparison of the attitudes and concerns of whale watchers in Belize with other surveyed areas, this survey provides data that could assist the Belizean government with conservation-oriented decision-making. For example, 70.2% of participants felt that it was very important that Belize has a strong commitment to dolphin conservation and, of those same participants, an additional 28.0% of participants ranked cetacean conservation as important. Additionally, 69.3% of participants said that they would actively boycott visiting pro-whaling countries and more specifically, 83.8% of participants stated that they would boycott visiting Belize if the country supported whaling, which has implications for Belize's position and policies at the International Whaling Commission.