

From harpoons to binoculars

Dead or alive, whales have long been a matter of life or death to Provincetown, at the northern tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Once this was one of the world's main whaling centres, sending boats as far as the Pacific to hunt and kill the leviathans. Now it makes a living by taking people to watch whales alive and unharmed.

People here hunted whales since prehistoric times, but it was the people of the Cape Cod peninsula – which juts into the Atlantic from the northeast United States – who turned it into an industry.

At first – like whalers for centuries before them – they hunted so-called right whales, which swam slowly and floated when dead, making them the 'right' whales to catch. But before long, hunters killed so many that their supply became depleted,

and whalers turned to killing sperm whales. These became the oil wells of their day, having their blubber turned into lamp oil, candles, soaps and cosmetics, animal feeds and margarine. Their meat provided food, and their bones were used to make tools, buttons and corsets.

The industry peaked in 1846, when 736 boats operated out of Cape Cod and its offshore island, Nantucket, providing work for 70,000 people and producing 43 million litres of oil a year. It was immortalized in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* – based on a true story of a whale ramming a ship – published just five years later.

Over the next century, industrial whaling spread worldwide, decimating species after species, including humpback, fin and blue whales. Commercial whaling was finally banned a quarter of a century ago – though some hunting continues under the guise of 'scientific whaling' for research. At the time of the ban, whaling nations protested that it would devastate local economies and cost jobs. Environmentalists replied that whales would be worth more alive than dead, as people would pay to be taken to see them in the wild – and so it has proved.

Today, the tourism industry provides 60-70 per cent of Provincetown's jobs, and the proportion is increasing. It is the same story around the world: 87 countries and territories now offer whale-watching tours. The number of people going on such tours has increased by 12 per cent annually since 1991 and now tops 10 million a year. And the amount of money tourists spend each year in local economies – on tour tickets, travel, food, hotels, souvenirs and so on – has grown from around \$320 million in 1991 to well over \$1 billion.

But as the popularity of whale-watching grows, so does the number of boats endangering sea life and the whales themselves, diminishing the experience for the tourists. Solutions might include issuing a restricted number of permits or only allowing whale watching in certain areas, since – like all forms of ecotourism – it must be practised sensitively and sustainably if it is to ensure a long-term future both for the whales and for the human communities that depend on them.



Photos: Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies

Evolving protection

Everyone, it seems, wants to go to the Galapagos. And no wonder: the 13 islands that emerge out of the Pacific about 1,000 kilometres off the coast of Ecuador are home to unique wildlife, which makes them one of the world's most sought-after tourist destinations.

The number of visitors has tripled over the last decade, threatening what they have come to see: one of the 20 most biologically diverse places on the planet, with at least 4,500 species of butterfly, 358 amphibian species and 258 mammal species. More than 60,000 people and almost 90 tourist vessels visit the islands each year, contributing about \$100 million to the Ecuadorian economy.

Ecuador has been trying for decades to reconcile tourism with conservation. From the start of tourism in the islands in 1967, eight years after the Galapagos National Park was established, it insisted that visitors must eat, live and sleep on the

tour boats – the only way to reach the islands – to minimize impact. It has designated zones for tourists' use and set limits on the numbers allowed at any one time. All must be accompanied by a licensed guide, who both teaches about the local environment and monitors it. Tourists must also stay on marked trails, leaving some areas untouched. And half the revenue from tourism goes to strengthen the National Park.

Nevertheless, threats remain, as the increasing population of both inhabitants and tourists increases the demand on local resources and generates more waste. And still more and more people want to come to the place that sparked Darwin's understanding of evolution. Policies will have to evolve to keep pace, to make sure it is not destroyed.



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Eco tourism

Walk through the cloud forests of Costa Rica. Go see elephants, giraffes and other animals in the game parks of Kenya, South Africa or the United Republic of Tanzania. Photograph tigers in Kanha National Park, India; dive among the corals of Australia's Great Barrier Reef or the Red Sea; or travel across Greenland's arctic wastes. Take your own tent, or stay in encampments or local villages – or even in luxury hotels. Ecotourism like this is increasing every year.

Tourism is now the world's largest industry – employing one in 10 of working people on the planet. They are needed to organize and operate the 800 million trips we take each year – a figure likely to double within 15 years. And, of course, tourism is not just about foreign travel: more than half the visitors to India's national parks are its own citizens.

Of course, as many countries and particular destinations increasingly realize, the draw is often the natural environment. One in every 10 tourists is already an ecotourist, and the proportion is increasing as more and more people live in towns and cities but want to experience wild spaces and species.

Ecotourism was officially defined by the United Nations World Ecotourism Summit as travel that:

- Contributes actively to conserving natural and cultural heritage.
- Includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributes to their well-being.
- Interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors.
- Lends itself better to independent travellers and organized tours for small groups.

Mass tourism has often harmed natural habitats, overused water and other resources and generated pollution and wastes – both in such hugely popular resorts as the Mediterranean coast and in remote ones like the Himalayas, where litter just doesn't biodegrade.



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We must try to tread as lightly as possible on the natural world and to respect local communities by:

Learning about the places we visit, and finding out about appropriate cultural behaviour

Protecting nature and trying not to damage or remove endangered plants or animals, or buying products made from them

Supporting the local community by, for example, buying local products, eating locally produced food and staying in locally owned accommodation

Minimizing environmental impact by disposing of rubbish carefully, and keeping our use of water and electricity as low as possible

Thinking about our impact: as guests, we shouldn't do anything we wouldn't do at home

We go on holiday for good experiences. Let's make them good for the people and environments we visit too.



H. Kersten/UNEP/Topham