

CAUTHE - 18th International Research Conference: 10th - 13th February 2009 at the Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Western Australia.

Hosted by Curtin Sustainable Tourism Centre, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia

See Change: Tourism & Hospitality in a Dynamic World

Abstract for consideration (Paper presentation)

From 'Sandals and Beards to Sophisticated Urbanites': The Opportunities and Management Dilemmas of a Dynamic **Wildlife Tourism Sector**

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Personal Profile

Susanna Curtin is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism Management at Bournemouth University. Her PhD was on the experiences and management of wildlife tourists which highlighted the UK outbound market and operators, the psychological benefits of watching wildlife, the influence of the tour leader, and the need to manage human rather than animal behaviours. She has also published work on swimming with dolphins in the wild and in captivity, experiences in nature, and codes of conduct with regards to seal watching. Her current interests concern the relationship between watching wildlife, tourism and quality of life.

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**From 'Sandals and Beards to Sophisticated Urbanites':
The Opportunities and Management Dilemmas of a
Dynamic Wildlife Tourism Sector**

Wildlife tourism has undoubtedly come of age. If you consider it as 'an old hat niche product', you may think again. The last five years has seen an incremental growth in the number of different types of commercial wildlife watching activities developed, the number of tourism businesses offering these activities worldwide and the number of tourists engaging in them either as the primary motivation for travel or as a day trip whilst on a standard rest and relaxation holiday. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the recent changes in the sector and suggest the contemporary management issues that industry and academia must research and address.

Once the only markets interested in travelling to the world's key wildlife destinations were 'twitchers' (serious bird-watchers) and hard-core naturalists. This is no longer the case. Instead the wildlife-watching market is incredibly diverse and embodies a number of types of activity to include specialist mammal watching, habitat specific tours, floral tours, thrill and adventure seeking activities, safaris and cruises, conservation or research orientated trips, and finally, opportunities for direct embodied experiences such as feeding wildlife or 'swim-with' (snorkelling) with marine mammals and other large charismatic marine fauna including sharks, sting-rays and potato-cod.

Wildlife tourists are predominantly an equal mix of males and females, are aged 35+ with a majority in the high disposable income and early-retired bracket. Due to increased interest in the natural world, the family market is also a growth area as is the younger market via the link between adventure travel and wildlife, safari honeymoons and conservation-orientated activity holidays such as recording sightings or marine mammals, turtle nest checking and helping game rangers.

Mintel (2006) and UNEP/CMS (2006) claim that the demand for nature experiences is growing worldwide at a faster rate than tourism in general. The global market size of wildlife tourism today is an estimated 12 million trips annually; currently growing at 10% per annum. According to the literature and industry commentators, this growth is driven by an increasingly urbanised population, the emotional and restorative nature of wildlife watching, the increase exposure through television documentaries, media coverage of endangered species, and silver screen documentaries such as the March of the Penguins. There is also an element of 'last chance' tourism to see species such as polar bears, tigers, gorillas and pandas which 'ups the ante'.

When conducted properly, wildlife tourism can represent high margin and value-added tourism which is why so many main stream operators are embracing the wildlife product. Increased memberships and tourism demand have also attracted charities such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the Born Free Foundation who now offer responsible holidays to view wildlife. In addition, there is an emergence of multi-activity holidays such as 'orca watching and the aura borealis' in Norway, 'wildlife plus total eclipse tours' and 'trekking, riding and grizzly bears' which, again, widens market potential. As in other types of tourism, there is a constant demand for new products, experiences and destinations. Emerging wildlife destinations include Antarctica,

Bolivia, Finland and China whilst the most popular consolidating markets for American and European travellers include Madagascar and the Pantanal rainforest in Brazil. This said, for wildlife enthusiasts, any destination has its own attractive flora and fauna which local commercial operators are quick to exploit.

Often, threatened species and habitats occur in countries that do not have the resources to protect them. The biggest challenge facing wildlife tourism is the human/wildlife conflict over habitat use and making protected areas financially self-sufficient whilst still protecting their biodiversity. Managing common resources will be at the forefront of discussion. For example what is the result of whaling on migratory whale populations which are later exploited for tourism in the waters of neighbouring countries? Similar conflicts occur with regards to seals and the fishing industry or bear hunting and the bear watching industry. How might such conflicts be resolved?

Moreover, the negative impacts of wildlife tourism are becoming well-documented and whilst site and species specific they nonetheless suggest the need for sustainable management policies. Whilst there is a responsible travel movement, it has not given as much attention to animal welfare as it has to eco-accommodation. This further enhances the need to develop and market wildlife watching codes of conduct, regulations, limits of development, and permits for successful and sustainable wildlife watching. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that responsible wildlife watching actually enhances the visitor experience rather than detracts from it as 'fleeing wildlife is no fun to watch'. Whilst wildlife-specific destinations such as The Galapagos, Namibia and Rwanda are primed to set such controls, other developing destinations clearly are not and wildlife opportunities become a 'free for all'. Much more work must be done on strengthening the potential economic and conservation orientated links if tracts of habitat and their indigenous species are to be saved for future generations.

According to industry commentators such as Mintel (2008) green issues are important for wildlife consumers who are becoming sensitive to their carbon footprint. Nevertheless there is very little evidence that customers are willing to financially offset this footprint via an environmental tax as ultimately they are still motivated by cost. Some operators prefer to talk about perceived 'carbon credit' (i.e. economic contribution to conservation) rather than carbon footprint. Nevertheless, the growing debate on climate change, the credit crunch and the rising cost of fuel may demand that future consumers holiday much closer to home.

For developed countries, the domestic market may represent great opportunity. Recent research has suggested that seeing wildlife close to home is as important as experiencing it in exotic locations, as at home there is a feeling of 'connection', 'relationship' and 'responsibility'. Watching wildlife has profound emotional effects on people. It has the potential to temporarily distract them from their hectic time-driven schedules, daily existence and work / family demands to a space where time is their own, and a place where it is possible to reconnect and restore their mental well-being to a state of equilibrium. This is further evidence that such experiences are potentially fundamental to human mental health and happiness; that the very existence of wildlife may indeed enhance the quality of our lives. The growth in demand for wildlife watching experiences is testimony to the human fascination with and need to reconnect with the natural world which underlines the importance of managing human behaviour, conservation, and the careful management of wildlife resources and their habitats.

(1075 words)