

## RESEARCH NOTE

### CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH WILD CETACEANS: GOOD PRACTICES AND ONLINE DISCUSSIONS OF CRITICAL EPISODES

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This research note reports on whale interactions in northern Norway and asks: How are close encounters not in line with good practices of whale watching represented and discussed in the online sources accessible by tourists and recreationists? Based on an exploratory qualitative investigation of critical episodes of close encounters with cetaceans, this article identifies some main aspects emerging from the online representations and discussions at various levels (local, national, international). The findings suggest some important points of reflections for future developments of whale watching in northern Norway as well as worldwide.

**Key words: Close encounters with cetaceans; Swim-with programs (SWPs);  
Whale-watching guidelines**

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#### Introduction

With a lack of governmental regulations, whale watchers are expected to adopt good practices that, sometimes, are reported in voluntary guidelines. Several factors are indicated as potentially influential on the compliance with such practices: the behavior of the local residents and the first operators entering the sector, the local development of the guidelines, and the tourists' expectations and requirements (Filby, Stockin, & Scarpaci, 2015; Lawrence & Phillips, 2004; Parsons & Woods-Ballard, 2003).

Based on the call for better communication with actual and potential whale watchers (Inman, Brooker, Dolman, McCann, & Wilson, 2016; Parsons & Brown, 2018), this article focuses on whale watchers, including tourists and recreationists, and the communication they are exposed to when searching for online information. It contends that while considering the compliance with voluntary guidelines and, more generally, good practices, it can be fruitful to expand the analysis to various online sources of information accessible to whale watchers. Moreover, focusing on the

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communication about critical episodes of behaviors not in line with good practices can give an indication of the extent to which existing voluntary guidelines are potentially reinforced or undermined by messages from other sources, which aspects might be particularly critical, and the opportunity or necessity of compulsory regulations. This note focuses on close encounters with wild cetaceans and asks: How are close encounters not in line with good practices of whale watching represented and discussed in the online sources accessible by tourists and recreationists?

The article starts by presenting some main aspects concerning close encounters with cetaceans and identifies relevant online sources of information. The focus then moves to the case of northern Norway, presenting the method and the empirical data. The final part highlights the main findings and offers some points of reflection about the management of close encounters with cetaceans, in the specific case of northern Norway and in general.

### *Close Encounters With Cetaceans*

Orams (2000) argued that closeness to the whales is not always the most important factor influencing tourists' enjoyment and satisfaction. Still, it is undoubted that some tourists seek very close encounters with whales, and with cetaceans in general. This is quite evident in the case of captive cetaceans. During in-water encounters with captive cetaceans, some tourists attempt to make connections with the animals—for example, through eye contact and performing what are meant to be affectionate behaviors, such as caressing and even kissing (Campos, Mendes, Oon do Valle, & Scott, 2017; Curtin, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, close encounters with wild animals are grouped as follows: from vessels/kayaks, in-water, and interactions. The first type of encounters occur when the distance between the vessels/kayaks and the animals is reduced. This can happen at the initiative of the humans, who aim to get a better view of the animals, or at the initiative of the animals (e.g., out of curiosity).

Other close encounters are in-water. During such encounters, which in the commercial context are usually referred to as swim-with programs (SWPs), people snorkel or dive in proximity to the animals.

Despite a dearth of scientific evidence about their potential effects on the animals, such activities are quite popular in various locations around the world (Convention on Migratory Species, 2017; Parsons & Brown, 2018).

In addition to the physical closeness with the animals and despite discouragement by many researchers (Parsons & Brown, 2018), some whale watchers search for interactions, typically touching and/or feeding the cetaceans.

### *Online Communication About Close Encounters With Cetaceans*

Online communication is very important in tourism (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Narangajavana, Fiol, Tena, Artola, & García, 2017). Online communication about close encounters with cetaceans can be initiated and managed by tourism companies, destination management organizations (DMOs), and other organizations relevant to tourism and/or cetaceans. Moreover, it can happen among individuals belonging to formalized groups, such as diving clubs, or more casual groups such as online communities of people passionate about cetaceans.

Information from and among such actors is relevant not only in relation to the practice of whale watching but also in relation to the creation of the whale watchers' expectations, their evaluation and satisfaction standards, and, ultimately, their perception of the quality of the whale-watching experience (Grönroos, 1984; Morgan, Moore, & Mansell, 2005; Narangajavana et al., 2017; Rodríguez Del Bosque, San Martín, Collado, & del Mar García de los Salmones, 2009). Consequently, it might be useful, when considering adherence to good practices, to investigate not only the content, form, and dissemination of possible existing guidelines, but also how the close encounters not in alignment with the recommendations are represented and discussed in online sources used by the relevant whale-watching actors mentioned in this section and easily accessible by actual and potential whale watchers.

### Method

The empirical investigation is qualitative oriented and based on the case of northern Norway,

including the counties of Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark. The author is relatively well known in whale watching in northern Norway, and in particular in Troms, as she has studied this phenomenon since its breakthrough in popularity in 2011. Moreover, she participated in several meetings with representatives of the local DMOs and associated companies, and she had an active role in the development of one of the existing sets of guidelines. After a provisioning episode occurring in the local area in 2016, she directed her attention to the online representations and discussions of close encounters with cetaceans in northern Norway, with a particular focus on those in conflict with the existing guidelines. Relevant Facebook posts from the group Whales in the North (WiN) and newspaper articles have been collected since then (December 2016–July 2019). During this time, in-water activities and kayaking with cetaceans gained popularity among local residents as well as tourists, attracting the attention of international tour operators, journalists, photographers, and researchers. Snorkeling/diving and kayaking with cetaceans activities are arranged commercially and also performed privately by local people and tourists who have their own equipment or rent it in location.

Additional online data were collected, consulting the online sources easily accessible by whale watchers seeking information about close encounters with cetaceans in northern Norway. Data were collected through a Google search using the following words: snorkeling with/swimming with/feeding whales/orcas Norway. Finally, the webpages of companies and tour operators selling close encounters with cetaceans and a TripAdvisor forum were consulted.

### Background

The first whale-watching guidelines, developed in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), date back to 2007 and are by Ocean Sounds, an NGO located in Nordland and focused on the research and conservation of whales and dolphins.

In 2015, the Tromsø DMO developed some guidelines in response to the concern expressed by many associated companies about the increasing number of whale watchers and the risks of accidents. These

guidelines are developed by two academicians from UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, of which one serves as chair of the Council of the European Cetacean Society, and one whale enthusiast and educator. Ocean Sounds also assisted in the process. These guidelines are endorsed by one representative of a nonprofit research organization supporting marine conservation (Tethys Research Institute) and two internationally well-known NGOs dedicated to marine life and cetaceans, OceanCare and Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC).

In 2016, NorWhale, the recently established association of whale-watching companies belonging to the commercial network Arctic 365, developed a set of guidelines meant to cover the whole country. These guidelines were signed by the three local DMOs (Tromsø, Vesterålen, and Senja); five whale watching companies, of which one has offered SWPs for several years; an accommodation facility; and two academicians from UiT.

For completeness, the case of three companies referring to other guidelines can be mentioned. Two boat-based whale-watching companies have developed their own guidelines, in one case in collaboration with WDC. A company that arranges SWPs refers explicitly to its adherence to a network of divers committed to respectful encounters with marine mammals.

### Close Encounters With Cetaceans in Codes of Conduct: Main Content, Form, and Communication

All the guidelines clearly state the speed, distance, and type of approach for boats. Focusing on kayaking, jet-skis, in-water encounters, and interactions (provisioning, touching), two tables are elaborated. Table 1 shows the main content of the guidelines. As shown in the table, in the first developed set of guidelines provisioning and touching were not included, and neither were kayaking and jet-skis, which are mentioned only in the most recent set of guidelines. The opportunity to include such activities became urgent with time, due to the increasing number of activities and participants, as well as some negative episodes. In general, it can be said that there is a broad agreement in relation to provisioning and touching, while some discrepancies can be found for SWPs.

Table 1  
Information About the Three Sets of Guidelines

Guidelines by:	Kayaking	Jet-skis	In-Water Encounters With Cetaceans	Provisioning	Touching
Ocean Sounds	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Strongly discouraged. Detailed explanation of such discouragement is provided.	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Tromsø DMO	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Strongly discouraged. Detailed explanation of such discouragement is provided.	Explicitly forbidden	Explicitly forbidden
NorWhale	Explicitly included in the first part of the code	Strongly discouraged	Diving and freediving are strongly discouraged. Snorkeling with whales is strongly discouraged. Snorkeling with orcas is regulated. Detailed information about the management and the safety of such activities are given.	Explicitly forbidden	Explicitly forbidden

Table 2 shows the communication of the guidelines in relation to the form, online availability, reference to the guidelines' developers and endorsements, and dissemination channels.

The guidelines' communication is good regarding the form, online availability, and inclusion of the developers and endorsements. With regard to the latter, the guidelines developed with and/or endorsed by marine research and conservation organizations report such collaboration, mentioning the specific organizations and sometimes using their logo and/or offering a website link. The online dissemination of the guidelines varies. In some cases, they are reported entirely, while in others only partially. The more broadly disseminated set of guidelines, through a variety of channels, is that by the Tromsø DMO.

#### Online Representations and Discussions About Close Encounters With Cetaceans

Table 3 summarizes the main findings about aspects of close encounters with cetaceans in northern Norway that are not in line with good practices and existing guidelines are discussed. The table elaborates on the findings that are presented in the following text that also provides some examples of online sources. Due to anonymity, the identity of individuals posting on social media is not reported.

#### *From Vessels, Kayaks, and Stand Up Paddles (SUPs)*

Close encounters are reported with cetaceans from boats and rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) at shorter-than-recommended distances, sometimes with pictures and videos, and commented on in the Facebook group WiN, as well as in online newspapers at different levels (e.g., ABC Nyheter, 2015). The reason for the short distance is not always evident. In some cases, it can be inferred that it is due to the animals approaching the vessels. Comments on such episodes usually refer to the surprise and strong emotions felt by those involved.

On the WiN group and in local newspapers (e.g., iTromsø, 2015), some episodes are reported about the search for close encounters with vessels at high speed chasing the animals. In some cases, pictures and videos are provided and commented on negatively. For example, a post from January 2018 reported: "wild animals were disrupted by human activity and they lost the herring they had herded for over an hour" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/hvalerinord/?ref=bookmarks>). Some comments on the WiN group concern the possible identification of the whale watchers.

The episode of a collision between a RIB and a whale in December 2016 was reported on the WiN group and in national and local newspapers (e.g., NRK, 2016). It concerns a UiT research RIB. The

Table 2  
Communication of the Three Sets of Guidelines

	Form	Online Availability (July 2019)	Information About Developers	Information About Endorsements	Dissemination Channels (Since Their Development)
Ocean Sounds	Text and pictorial	Yes ( <a href="http://arctic-adventure-norway.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/WWF_whale-watching-guidelines.pdf">arctic-adventure-norway.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/WWF_whale-watching-guidelines.pdf</a> )	Yes		<u>The guidelines</u> : webpage of a whale watching company, oral presentation (key-speaker) at a workshop about whale watching (recreational and commercial) in Tromsø. <u>Mentioned</u> : Ocean Sounds webpage, WDC blog, international and local channels (TV, radio, newspapers).
Tromsø DMO	Text and pictorial	Yes ( <a href="http://www.visitromso.no/en/guidelines-whalewatching">www.visitromso.no/en/guidelines-whalewatching</a> )	Yes	Yes	<u>The guidelines and link to it</u> : DMO webpage and Facebook page, the presentation of few whale watching companies on the DMO webpage, ICW Whale Watching Handbook, local newspapers, Uit webpage news, WDC blog and news, WiN group. <u>Part 1 of the guidelines</u> : webpage of a SWPs company. <u>Mentioned</u> : commercial network whale watching seminar, national newspapers, the presentation of few companies on the national DMO webpage, local newspapers, sporadically on the WiN group.
NorWhale	Text and pictorial	Yes ( <a href="http://www.norwhale.org/en">www.norwhale.org/en</a> )	Yes		<u>The guidelines</u> : the association webpage, the commercial network webpage, Facebook page and seminar, ICW Whale Watching Handbook, a local DMO, WiN group. <u>Mentioned</u> : local newspapers, sporadically on the WiN group.

Table 3  
The Main Aspects of the Online Discussions About Close Encounters not in Line With Good Practices and Guidelines

	Close Encounters With Wild Cetaceans				
	Vessels	Kayaking/SUPs	In-Water	Provisioning	Touching
Aspects that are discussed	1. Conformity to good practices and guidelines (safety of humans and animals) 2. Identification of the whale watchers involved	Safety (humans)	1. Conformity to good practices and guidelines (safety of humans) 2. Identification of the whale watchers involved	Legitimacy	Legitimacy
At what level do such discussions occur?	Mainly local	Mainly local	Mainly national and local	Mainly national and local	Mainly national and local

main aspects commented on are the dynamics of the accident and the minor injuries reported by the two students who were driving the boat.

With regard to research practices on cetaceans occurring in the local area and, in particular, the process of tagging the animals, a post on the WiN group raises the question of the animal welfare aspects of such practices. In a post from November 2018, a worried Facebook member reported:

A few nights ago we saw someone sitting on top of the net at a trawler (while pumping) trying to tag orcas ... the animals were clearly avoiding the RIB and “hiding” on all sides of the fishing boat ... . Apart from the dramatic increase of the horrible lack of ethics and standards by boat users this season, practices like this just worsens [worsen] the situation. (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/hvalerinord/?ref=bookmarks>)

Concerning kayaking, the webpage of a company offering kayaking with whales includes several videos and photos. Links to videos showing very close encounters, sometimes almost collisions, between kayakers and whales are available through local, national, and international online sources (e.g., Rumble Viral, 2018). Such comments sometimes refer to the danger of such encounters.

With regard to close encounters from vessels and devices other than boats, catamarans, and RIBs, close encounters from SUPs and surfboards are reported online. Close encounters from SUPs have been reported on various webpages reporting the experiences of a travel blogger (e.g., Arctic Campers,

2017). One episode about a surfing competition and the sudden appearance of orcas close to the participants was reported on several online sources (AFP News Agency, 2017). In this case, the people were not searching for such close encounters.

*In-Water*

Promotional material by SWP companies and tour operators includes text, pictures, and sometimes videos. These encounters with cetaceans tend to be represented in a way that highlights the sense of adventure and wonder, and the strong emotions that such challenging encounters can provoke (e.g., Whale Swim Adventures, n.d.). The same type of representation can be found on noncommercial international online sources (e.g., The Sweet Wanderlust, 2019).

On the TripAdvisor forum, the question is raised about the safety of snorkeling/diving. In a post from 2018, one participant comments:

you will see that these animals are gentle, curious and not aggressive in the wild. So it’s actually a low risk activity. (TripAdvisor, n.d.)

Another forum participant writes:

killer whales . . . enjoy the stimulation from humans when out in the wild . . . and 9/10 [they] interact with you before you do them. Obviously it is a wild animal and you can never be too careful but all in all killer whales have rarely hurt/killed humans in the ocean. (TripAdvisor, n.d.)

The safety issue is presented in some articles on national and local channels (e.g., Nordlys, 2017). Such concern increased and was reported quite broadly in the local press when, in November 2018, an official communication by the Directorate of Fisheries encouraged whale watchers to be more responsible, following information suggesting the dangerous closeness of swimmers from tourism boats searching for whale encounters near fishing vessels (Fiskeridirektoratet, 2018). The safety of in-water activities is discussed in several posts in the WiN group, with comments reporting the observation of some irresponsible behaviors and reminding of the necessity to use caution and follow safety practices, such as the use of dive flags.

At the international level, the few episodes of negative experiences of in-water encounters concern photographers (e.g., ABC News, 2016).

#### *Provisioning and Touching*

The online data show two episodes of behaviors strongly discouraged by all the guidelines. One episode concerns a tourism company posting a Facebook video showing tourists feeding orcas and taking pictures while doing so. Most of the reactions following the publication of this video were very negative, to the extent that the company closed the comment field and, shortly after, removed the video. Among the comments, someone insinuated that feeding wild animals is quite common among wildlife photographers and, in the case of seagulls and sea eagles, also among the local tourism companies.

The other episode concerns a documentary on which children on a boat tour feed and touch the cetaceans. This documentary was broadcast on national TV and is available on the online platform of one channel (NRK TV, n.d.). This encounter is represented as extraordinary and safe. Many online comments are positive. The link to the documentary was also reported on the WiN group and commented on differently. Some of these comments highlight the inappropriateness of such interactions with wild animals and the paradox of the documentary being broadly appreciated while the aforementioned episode was severely criticized. For example, a post from December 2017 reports some concern, both in general and in relation to the creation of expectations:

You should not feed the orca (or any wild animal for that matter) no matter what the reason for TV, to get good photos or to get them closer. You should also for sure not try to pet them as these kids are doing. This is teaching bad habits and any kid who wants to come will want the same experience after seeing this. (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/hvalerinord/?ref=bookmarks>)

#### Final Remarks

A discrepancy can be noted in relation to the level at which the representations and discussions occur about close encounters not aligned with good practices. Critical aspects tend to be discussed at the local and national level. With regard to the WiN group, which has members worldwide and where communication sometimes occurs in English, discussions of critical aspects occur mainly among local people, including tourism operators.

Discussions about episodes of irresponsible close encounters sometimes refer to the existing guidelines or, more generally, to good practices concerning boat driving, diving/snorkeling, interactions with wildlife, and whale watching. In these discussions, questions are raised about the safety of the people and animals, and in many cases also about the possible identification of the involved individuals and organizations.

Although such episodes are not reported frequently, it can be reasonably assumed that they create a tense atmosphere among the operators. This raises the question of whether a broader and better dissemination of the guidelines could improve the situation or, alternatively, whether the situation might be improved in other ways (e.g., by introducing compulsory governmental regulations). This is essentially a question about irresponsible behaviors occurring due to ignorance, incompetence, or carelessness. An improved dissemination of the guidelines could help in cases where such behaviors derive from ignorance, while in the other cases compulsory actions such as a system of certification, licensing, control, and sanctions might be a more effective solution.

With regard to the guideline dissemination, it can be noted that the webpage of the national DMO refers to a set of guidelines, but only through links to presentations of some companies. Based on this and the discussions of the critical aspects mainly

at the local and national level, it is questionable to what extent international tourists are aware of the good practices expected of independent tourists as well as from the operators they might decide to use. It is fair to assume that international whale watchers interested in close encounters with cetaceans in northern Norway may be poorly informed about local good practices and relevant debates.

This article concludes by identifying some questions and emerging issues for future research deriving from the online material about the situation in northern Norway and the challenges of the recent popularity of close encounters with cetaceans:

- To what extent are close encounter practices by professional journalists, documentarists, photographers, and researchers in line with good practices of responsible whale watching? In cases of discrepancy, are such practices legitimate and desirable? How can a possible discrepancy be explained to the commercial operators and to whale watchers in general?
- To what extent are snorkeling/diving and kayaking with cetaceans, both commercial and private, performed in line with safety standards and good practices? Might the people engaging in such activities have a different perception of risk than generic whale watchers? If so, might strict compulsory regulations better suit this specific form of whale watching than voluntary guidelines?

#### Biographical Note

Giovanna Bertella is an Associate Professor at the School of Business and Economics, UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Her research interests are: small-scale tourism, food tourism, rural tourism, nature-based tourism, event management, tourism entrepreneurship, knowledge, and networks.

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