

RESEARCH NOTE

TOURISM ACTORS' ENGAGEMENT AND LOGICS OF WHALE PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION IN NORWAY

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The perception of activities that may harm whales and their coexistence with whale tourism can be problematic for a destination's attractiveness and its potential role in setting good standards for the sector and educating tourists. This research note investigates the online debate about the legitimacy of a research project on wild whales in Norway. In particular, it investigates the local tourism actors' engagement in such debate, and how the two sides of the debate argue for the legitimacy of different logics of whale protection and conservation. The findings derived from a thematic and discourse analysis show that the local tourism sector and academia minimally engage in the debate and that the debate presents elements of different logics relating to the traditional and compassionate conservation paradigms. This article considers the tourism actors' non-engagement in the aforementioned debate as a missed opportunity, and concludes by inviting the reader to reflect on the collaboration between the tourism sector and academia, in particular its desirability, motivations, and consequences.

Key words: Whale protection and conservation; Conservation paradigm; Whale tourism

Introduction

The coexistence of whale tourism with activities that may threaten whales can be problematic. A case extensively discussed in the tourism literature (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2012) is whaling. Some scholars note that how tourists perceive whaling can influence their choices (Bertulli et al., 2016; Higham & Lusseau, 2008). For example, Parsons

and Rawles (2003) found that a high percentage of whale watchers perceive whaling and whale watching as incompatible with each other, and thus consider refraining from joining a whale-watching tour in a country that engages in whaling. This is an example of how activities that are perceived to be in conflict with whale protection and conservation can damage a country's image and can have negative effects on a destination's attractiveness

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(Hoyt & Hvenegaard, 2002). This potential negative effect can be amplified by worldwide online boycott actions, as suggested in the animal welfare study by Shaheer et al. (2021).

Tourism operators engage differently in whale protection and conservation activities, and this can influence how whale tourism is regulated and performed. The case of Norway can be reported as an example. Tourism operators offering sea-based activities in areas where ocean oil and gas explorations are being carried out engage to a limited extent in the debate about whether such activities and tourism are incompatible with each other (Bertella & Vester, 2015). Regarding whale watching, tourism operators can engage in whale protection through different types of collaboration, such as by selecting and including nongovernmental organizations and international partners and by complying with the local guidelines (Bertella, 2019a, 2019b). These behaviors by tourism operators can help a destination set good standards for the sector and communicate environmentally relevant messages to tourists.

This research note aims at exploring various discourses of environmental conservation and understanding how wildlife conservation is contested within a particularly significant whale-watching location in Norway. It explores the logics (i.e., the sets of beliefs and premises that lead to a conclusion) underpinning whale protection and conservation in tourism destinations. This is done by referring to the different paradigms of wildlife conservation and commenting on an empirical case concerning the debate about the legitimacy of a research project based on acoustic experiments on wild whales in Lofoten. The investigation was performed through a thematic and critical discourse analysis of online documents, and focused on two topics: the engagement of the local tourism practitioners and academics in the debate concerning the research project, and how the legitimacy of the project and the underlying logics are argued.

Wildlife Conservation Paradigms

Wildlife conservation thinking can rely on logics sustained by different philosophical positions, and such logics can be approached referring to different conservation paradigms. In the tourism literature,

some scholars discuss environmental and ethical positions relevant to wildlife conservation (Holden, 2003; Winter, 2020). Nonetheless, this study does not refer to such approaches, and adopts instead a concept from the conservation literature, namely the one of conservation paradigm (Santiago-Ávila & Lynn, 2020). In the last decades, conservation science has developed beyond strictly biological considerations, and the conservation paradigms can be understood as the overarching perspectives, sets of beliefs, and standards on conservation science (Kareiva & Marvier, 2012; Salafsky et al., 2002). The adoption of the conservation paradigm concept responds to the opportunity to incorporate ethics into wildlife conservation, without overseeing the practical dimension of the conservation interventions (Paquet & Darimont, 2010).

Regarding wildlife, three paradigms are identified in the conservation literature (Santiago-Ávila & Lynn, 2020). The first is the traditional conservation paradigm (TCP): adherents to such paradigm are concerned about wildlife protection but at the same time argue for the right to harm some animals in some circumstances (Wallach et al., 2020). This paradox can be explained by referring to instrumentalism and nativism (Santiago-Ávila & Lynn, 2020; Wallach et al., 2020). According to such orientations, nonhuman animals can be sacrificed when they threaten the sustainability of ecosystems favorable to human life (Wallach et al., 2020). Traditional conservationists dismiss claims of animals' intrinsic value when such claims conflict with human and ecological interests. Philosophically, TCP is underpinned by the Western mainstream thought about human exceptionality and anthropocentrism (Santiago-Ávila & Lynn, 2020).

There are two emerging paradigms that are considered alternatives to TCP: the compassionate conservation paradigm (CCP) and the multispecies justice paradigm (MJP). These paradigms recognize the intrinsic value of each animal and are centered, respectively, on compassion and justice (Bobier & Allen, 2021). Compassionate conservationists reject practices that intentionally harm animals and advocate a peaceful coexistence with animals, which they believe humans have the moral obligation to care for (Bobier & Allen, 2021; Coghlan & Cardilini, 2021). Compassion also plays a significant role in MJP as fairness can be

considered based on the fundamental ethic of care (Treves et al., 2018). Unlike CCP, however, MJP does not emphasize prevention of animal suffering but respect for nonhuman animals and their agency (Santiago-Ávila & Lynn, 2020). The philosophical foundations of CCP and MJP relate to the ideas of animal ethics of posthumanistic and ecofeminist philosophers such as Mary Midgley, Donna Haraway, Carol J. Adams, and Lori Gruen (Batavia et al., 2020).

Methodology

To explore the logics underpinning whale protection and conservation in tourism destinations, this note explores the case of a research project about conducting acoustic experiments on wild whales in Lofoten, Norway. The data about the debate concerning such experiments were obtained from the online documents reporting about the research project and were collected on June 25, 2021 through initial Google searches using the English and Norwegian keywords whale*experiment*Lofoten/hval*eksperiment*Lofoten. For both searches, the collection was limited to the first 50 links reported by the search engine because a preliminary analysis showed that, after this limit, the articles were from news aggregation websites and they duplicated the text of original articles. The hyperlinks included in the identified documents were used to find additional documents.

The dataset resulted in 38 documents, which were classified according to the language, type, source, and position in relation to the debated project. The latter was inferred from the documents' source and content. For example, the documents by the organizations involved in the project were classified as proproject, and those by the organizations that promoted or signed petitions or letters to stop the experiments were classified as against the project. The category "very critical" was used for documents from sources different from those promoting action to stop the experiments but expressing clear concern or/and reporting the link of petitions to sign or/and using adjectives to qualify the experiment such as "cruel" and "inhumane." In case of doubt, the documents were classified as neutral and were excluded from the following thematic and discourse analysis. Through this analysis, the

main themes of the debate were identified, and the construction and deconstruction processes of the legitimacy of the logics of wildlife protection and conservation underlying the positions supporting and opposing the project were explored (Hannam & Knox, 2005; Wodack & Meyer, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

Lofoten is the location of the research project at the center of the debate object of investigation. Lofoten is a major tourism destination in northern Norway. It hosts the oldest and biggest whale-watching company in the country, and the national authorities have recently approved a plan for the building of an experiential visitor center, called The Whale, in this area (<https://www.thewhale.no/>). Various tourism operators and researchers belong to the network supporting the planned visitor center, and the center's vision is to educate and inspire tourists to learn about and respect the whales and the ocean.

The aim of the research project about acoustic experiments on whales is to understand the animals' reactions to sounds from human activities, particularly from military and industrial (oil and gas exploration) activities (<https://www.ffi.no/aktuelt/nyheter/ffi-skal-teste-horselen-hoshval>). The project client is the US Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology. The partners include: National Marine Mammal Foundation, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, US Navy, University in Århus, Zoological Park in Kristiansand, equipment producer LKARTS-Norway. Approved by the Norwegian Food Safety Authority to be performed in 2021–2024, the research project consists in the following activities: the capture of juvenile minke whales in a sea area limited by some nets, their temporary (ca. 2 days) captivity in modified aquaculture cages, their immobilization, the installation of electrodes on the animals, and the exposition of the animals to sounds. The first series of experiments aimed at the capture of 12 animals. It was planned for May 15–June 22, 2021 but the experiments didn't occur. The reason was that only four animals were captured and, among them, three were released as they were judged unsuitable for the experiment (due to their size), and one escaped (<https://www.nrk.no/nordland/>

forsvarets-forskningsinstitutt-avslutter-testing-av-vagehval-i-lofoten-1.15554882).

The following text presents and discusses the findings about the engagement of local tourism practitioners and academics in the debate concerning the research project, and how the legitimacy of different logics of whale protection and conservation is argued.

The information presented in Table 1 and the data on which the table relies show a considerable engagement by animal welfare organizations in the debate, a moderate engagement by Norwegian actors, and a fundamental lack of engagement by the local tourism operators and academics. Many documents that are against the project or are very critical of it are from or refer to three animal welfare organizations, and some of them include links to these organizations' websites and to the petitions. A letter of concern authored by a non-Norwegian whale welfare organization was signed by 54 individuals affiliated with various organizations, mainly universities, research institutes, and non-profit organizations, from 14 countries worldwide. The sources of the five project documents are Norwegian, and four of these documents are from the organizations directly involved in the project and its approval. Although the project concerns

whales and such animals are among the main tourist attractions of the location of the project, neither the type nor the source of the documents indicates any engagement from the local tourism sector. This confirms the minimal engagement noted by Bertella and Vester (2015) in the case of oil and gas explorations. The only element suggesting some engagement by the local tourism academia is the signature on a letter of concern by a researcher (this note's author) while none of the names of the researchers involved in the planned experiential whale center appears in any document.

A deeper analysis of the documents in favor of, against, and very critical of the research project showed that the coexistence of the research project with tourism is only marginally mentioned. Tourism considerations appear in a petition against the project, more precisely in a section dedicated to an antiwhaling campaign. Here, tourism is presented as an alternative to whaling. Whaling is also reported in other documents opposing the project. One of these documents mentions whaling as an outdated activity ("Norway, a country that still engages in commercial whaling . . ."), and another document comments on the possible repercussions of whaling on the country's image. This is clearly stated in the following considerations: "Norway

Table 1
Dataset

Characteristics	<i>N</i>
Language	
English	29
Norwegian	9
Type	
Articles (including blogs)	30
Letters of concern to the Norwegian prime minister, Norwegian Food Safety Authority, and US Department of Commerce and Defence	3
Petitions against the project (192,293 supporters)	3
Social media	2
Source	
Websites about entertainment, sport, environmental and scientific news	23
Petition platforms	3
Norwegian, UK and US animal welfare organizations	8
Organization mainly responsible for the project (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment)	3
Norwegian authority responsible for the project approval (Norwegian Food Safety Authority)	1
Position	
Very critical	15
Against	11
Pro	5
Neutral	7

already has a bad reputation when it comes to the treatment of whales. . . . The possible conduct of this experiment will strengthen the image of Norway as a country that exploits whales in an unethical way." Such considerations can be related to the possible compromised attractiveness of the destination and the risk of boycott actions (Hoyt & Hvenegaard, 2002; Shaheer et al., 2021). As commented earlier, the links among the various opposing documents are quite extensive, and although no sign of boycott action was seen in the analyzed documents, its possibility cannot be excluded.

Table 2 shows an overview of the discussed themes and the main points and expressions used in the documents. The elements relevant to the legitimacy of different logics of whale protection and conservation are presented in the following text.

The data suggest that the proproject side of the debate is conceptually close to TCP (Wallach et al., 2020). The proproject documents emphasize the research project's relevance to the improvement of whale protection in relation to the sound pollution emanating from industrial and military activities. Regarding this aspect, two documents opposing the project rhetorically ask if the reduction of industrial and military activities in the bodies of water inhabited by whales would be better than conducting the experiments. This comment suggests the possibility of a marked difference between the two sides of the debate in terms of anthropocentrism. In the

mentioned documents, the suggestion by the opposers is to give up the possible advantages for humans deriving from industrial and military activities, and to prioritize the animal welfare.

The ways that the project team and its supporters and opposers are described in the documents are relevant to the legitimacy processes and can be commented on by referring to the scientific qualifications, nationalities, and emotions of the involved actors. The proproject documents describe the team's qualification as exceptionally high, and this is related to the legal approval by the competent national public authority and to its international (Norwegian–American) composition. The team's qualification is described in one document referring to the members "being selected in competition with worldwide experts." A document reports that the project is supported by four people from four Norwegian organizations (from the academia and the nonprofit and public sectors). Nationality appears to be a factor influencing the sense of self-confidence emerging from the proproject documents. This is evident in a comment by the main organization responsible for the project: "We received some reactions from some American environmental organizations. It was expected. . . . Norwegians are better off seeing that this is the knowledge we need to be able to protect in the future." In this statement, the person responsible for the research project juxtaposes the American environmental organizations

Table 2

Themes of the Debate and Their Discussion: Main Points and Expressions Used

Themes	Documents Supporting the Project	Documents Opposing the Project
Project	Relevance (scientific advancements and practical implications for better management of human activities), novelty, risky (for the involved researchers), approved by the Norwegian authority	Risky (for the involved researchers and whales and other animals), the risk outweighs the potential benefits, the novelty increases the risk, doubts about the legality of the experiments according to international standards, cruel, unnecessary, unacceptable, unethical
Project team and proproject supporters	Courage (willing to sacrifice their safety), highly qualified, Norway–US collaboration, concern for whale conservation (species level), care for the involved animals (minimize the possible negative effects)	Unrealistically optimistic about the feasibility of the experiments, irresponsible in relation to human and animal safety, doubts about qualification (veterinary expertise)
Project opponents	Non-Norwegian, against any kind of animal experiment	Concerned, responsible, internationally and broadly supported by scientists and lay people from different countries
Whales	Fascinating (capable of communicating), capable of feeling scared and stressed, to be protected from human activities, objects of experiments	Fascinating (gentle, beautiful), capable of feeling pain and stress, to be protected from human activities, victims of experiments

to Norwegians (unclear whether it is meant the Norwegian environmental organizations or the population in general), suggesting that the latter can understand the utility of the project better than the former. Such consideration can be interpreted as referring to the project organizers recognizing different cultural approaches to wildlife conservation and strongly advocating the superiority of their own or/and the Norwegian sovereignty over the decisions about whether and how to conduct the research.

The opposers to the project emphasize their emotions, particularly their worry and concern, as shown in the expressions “we are troubled” and “we deeply regret.” This can be interpreted as their implicit recognition of the legitimacy of discussing animal experiments based not only on knowledge considerations, which is an aspect observable in the letter of concern signed by several scientists, but also on a pronounced sense of shared responsibility. In the petitions and in one letter of concern written “on behalf of [organization’s name] and its more than 217,000 members and constituents worldwide,” the authors consider their legitimacy in light of the broadness of the consensus on their position. This can be considered in relation to the concept of justice, not in terms of multispecies, as in MJP, but limited to the human community. In particular, the reference to a vast number of members, who are not identified as researchers, suggest that the issue of wildlife protection is not perceived as an exclusive monopoly of scientists.

Another aspect of the debate that is relevant to legitimacy concerns the representation of the animals. In all documents, the animals tend to be described in passive forms. At the species level, whales must be protected from human activities, and at the individual level, they are the objects or victims of the experiments according respectively to the two debate positions. This conflicts with the recognition of animal agency in MJP (Santiago-Ávila & Lynn, 2020). Both sides of the debate show some fascination with whales, and what is different is the emphasis given to their potential suffering. The position that is observable in the documents against the project is in line with CCP (Coghlan & Cardilini, 2021). These documents are quite focused on the possibility that the whales could experience “considerable pain and trauma” as a result of the

experiments, qualified in one document as “utterly inhumane.” These documents also comment on the possible suffering of other individual animals (marine mammals, fish, seabirds) living in the area. The proproject documents, on the other hand, give priority to the considerations at the species level (whales) and accept the sacrifice of individual animals, as it can be interfered by the mention to their effort to reduce, but not eliminate, possible stress and pain for the animals, in the name of a broader benefit, in line with TCP (Wallach et al., 2020).

Conclusions

This article reports the findings from the investigation of the online debate about the legitimacy of a research project on the wild whales in the Norwegian tourism destination of Lofoten. The findings show that the local tourism practitioners and academics are hardly engaged in such debate. The investigation findings also suggest that the debate is characterized by elements from the traditional and compassionate conservation paradigms. The legitimacy of these two paradigms is argued by referring to the relevance attached to scientific knowledge, anthropocentrism, and to a certain extent, nationalism, on the one side, and to a combination of scientific knowledge with the ethics of care and pluralism in human terms (internationalism and broad consensus including lay people) and animal terms (whales and other animals) on the other side.

This research note helps provoke reflections about the different approaches to wildlife protection and conservation, and about the possibility that tourism practitioners and scholars will engage in the discussion about the most opportune approach to adopt. Ideally, such engagement could result in an increased attractiveness of the destination and a decreased likelihood of boycott actions. It can be argued that the non-engagement observed in the investigated case is a missed opportunity for the local tourism sector and academia to contribute to the discussion and promotion of whale protection and conservation according to their respective perspectives. In the case of tourism scholars, a possible engagement can be perceived as challenging due to the risk of conflicts with colleagues and tourism actors that could compromise future collaboration due to divergent views, interests, and

priorities. Still, it can be reasonably argued that academic engagement is desirable for an impactful tourism research that values dialogue within and outside academia.

This note invites also to some reflections about the academia–tourism sector collaboration and dialogue from the sector's side. Whale tourism operators are sometimes criticized in relation to their activities threatening the animal's safety. On the other hand, whale researchers tend to be immune from such criticism. Consequently, the collaboration of the tourism operators with the whale researcher environment is usually presented as a form of the sector's commitment to wildlife conservation and protection. This note suggests that this link between collaboration and commitment is not uniquely perceived, as it depends heavily on the underlying assumptions about wildlife. This points to the opportunity to explore critically why the whale-watching sector sometimes, but not always, collaborates and engages in relevant debates with the whale research environment. For example, future studies could explore to what extent collaborative projects between the tourism sector and academia are a matter of opportunism or a genuine sense of shared responsibility, and what the consequences of such motivations might be on the educational aspect of the experience, the destination and the animals.

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