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Tourism and marine mammal welfare

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Tourist boat trips to observe seals, cetaceans, sea-otters, manatees, dugongs and polar bears have the general effect that the people who profit from such trips and often the governments of the countries involved want to conserve the animals. The public who might wish to visit such animals are in favour of conservation. As a consequence, most countries see more benefit in conservation than in killing marine animals, for example Argentina and Brazil. Since most marine mammal chasing and killing procedures cause very poor welfare, often for long periods, avoidance of killing reduces the amount of poor welfare in the animals¹.

Whilst some land animals are the subject of hunting for "sport" or for trophies, marine mammals are not a major target in this way. As with rhino horn, bear gall-bladders, tiger penises etc., there is some demand for marine mammal body parts. This can lead to poaching, even when most people want to protect the animals. However, for most species the demand is not great.

Marine mammals have been kept in captivity to impress people for three thousand years. Tourists are often paying customers at circuses, zoos and aquaria. The welfare problems are greatest for all animals taken from the wild and also when the keeping conditions are inadequate for meeting the needs of the animals. Training animals may make the life of the animal more interesting or may be associated with fear. Some captive cetaceans and most polar bears show stereotypies, many captive marine mammals have health and reproduction problems and the life expectancy of captive cetaceans is less than that of wild animals. All of these are measures of poor welfare^{2,3,4}. Some countries now ban the keeping of cetaceans for animal welfare reasons.

Boats taking tourists to see marine mammals using well-controlled observation methods may cause no negative effects on the animals. However, boat approach for observation, chasing by boats and swimming with the animals may cause: avoidance behaviour, reduced time for foraging, social disruption, injury, increased disease, reduced breeding success or reduced life expectancy. Dolphin populations declined where dolphin watching occurred, but there was no decline in a matched population where there was no dolphin watching. Since all of these negative effects can be avoided, it is essential that there should be codes of practice and laws to avoid poor welfare in the animals. Swimming with dolphins always seems to lead to avoidance of swimmers and sometimes to worse effects on the animals. If tourists are given good information about why not all expectations can be realised, they usually do not make demands that could lead to harm for the animals^{5,6,7}.

Other tourist activities, such as fishing tourism, may result in marine mammals being killed as the animals are perceived to be competitors with the humans who wish to fish. Sometimes, boats hit and injure or kill marine mammals.

References

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