



WILDLIFE TOURISM AUSTRALIA Inc.

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2 September 2005

Whale and Dolphin Watching Guideline Review
Wildlife Impact and Protection Section
Department of the Environment and Heritage
GPO Box 787
CANBERRA ACT 2601

COMMENTS ON DRAFT AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR WHALE AND DOLPHIN WATCHING

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft *Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching*. We are pleased to provide the following comments for your consideration. If appropriate, we would also like to be involved in any further discussions or forums for review of guidelines regarding cetaceans in Australian waters.

Wildlife Tourism Australia (WTA) is an incorporated association that promotes the sustainable development of a diverse wildlife tourism industry that in turn supports conservation. WTA's membership base comprises wildlife tourism operators, government bureaucrats, researchers, and others with a critical interest in the nexus between wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism.

Comments on the draft Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching

1. Discrimination between Whale Watching and Dolphin Watching Operations

We believe the guidelines need to discriminate between whale watching and dolphin watching operations as the different species and different behaviours will determine what is acceptable approach distances and interaction. Currently swim-with-dolphin licences are issued in some States, however swimming with whales is not permitted, however the guidelines do not seem to address these differences. Many of the whale species observed during whale-watching season are on a migratory path, compared with dolphins which may reside in areas all year around. We suggest that the guidelines need to address these differences with separate guidelines for whale watching and dolphin watching operators. The guidelines appear to be more related to whale watching than dolphin watching operations.

2. National standards for vessels

a) Vessel approach distances and operation

It is suggested that the 'no waiting zone' in front of and behind whales is increased to an area of 180 degrees rather than the 60 degrees outlined in the guidelines document to prevent blocking the path of the animals or 'chasing' the animals from behind, particularly in the case of migrating whales. The 'no waiting', 'caution' and 'no approach' zones would appear to be related more to whales than dolphins and may be difficult to judge in the case of a large pod of dolphins. Different guidelines may need to be applied for dolphin watching operations.

b) Operation of vessels when watching whales and dolphins



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It is suggested that the speeds for entering the caution zone be made more prescriptive such as 'reduce speed to 4 knots' rather than 'move at slow speed' which is subjective.

3. Additional guidelines governing mothers and calves

There does not seem to be any discretion in the guidelines between mothers and calves and single adult animals, and suggest that the guidelines take into account and mention stricter regulations for approach distances for nursing mothers and calves.

While it is commendable to have such guidelines in place to assist the relevant Commonwealth, State, and Territory Governments and management authorities to design policy and implement legislation, the issue seems to be in the enforcement of such guidelines and ensuring that operators issued with licenses adhere to the regulations.

Perhaps in further discussions with each of the authorities governing policy and legislation, the following could be suggested:

- Mandatory accreditation for operators issued with whale-watching and dolphin watching licences (which would include a public education component and training for operators).
- Stricter controls on the number of whale watching and dolphin watching licenses in any one jurisdiction.
- Discussion on designated boat-based whale watching areas along the Australian coastline (as per the example of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service of restricting commercial boat-based whale watching operations to two areas only) to allow rest and undisturbed passage of whales on migratory paths.
- Greater policing of operators and adherence to the legislation in each jurisdiction with severe penalties including loss of license for operators found to be in breach of the laws.

These measures would be a step toward ensuring that a responsible whale watching industry continues to operate in Australia without disturbance to the resource that underpins it.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any clarification of the above points, and as stated earlier, we would welcome the opportunity to be involved in any further discussions or forums for review of guidelines regarding cetaceans in Australian waters.

Yours sincerely

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Vice-Chair
On behalf of Wildlife Tourism Australia