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Developing a sustainable whale watch industry

Key words: whale watching, climate change, sustainability

Abstract:

Whale watching is a billion dollar industry worldwide and expanding at a high rate. The migratory corridors, feeding, resting and calving sites of whales, which are used for whale watching may be influenced by changing ocean currents and water temperatures. Whale watch operators are also exposed to altered weather conditions with severe weather events increasing worldwide. Whales are responding through a shift in migration time, behavior, abundance and distribution. The growth of this industry is mainly attributed to the recovery of well-known whale species such as the Humpback whale and the concomitant increase in their density, which has prompted many operators to now offer a money back guarantee if there are no sightings. The east coast of Australia is a known for its thriving whale watch industry. However, recent and projected shifts in the East Australian Current (EAC) are linked to dramatic effects both on the physical and biological marine environment, which could influence the whale migration dynamics with associated impacts on the local whale watching industry. Here I assessed the avenues and constraints that are in place to develop a sustainable whale industry for the east coast of Australia. The policy framework, business approach and strategies are discussed. Study outcomes indicate that the mostly unregulated industry has little capacity to respond to changes in whale migration and weather conditions and that flexibility needs improvement through a proactive approach by operators.