

# Whale watching in Venezuela

Jaime Bolaños and Auristela Villarroel have been conducting an assessment of the socio-economic benefits of Whalewatching in Venezuela.

**Location:** Venezuela

**Lead Researcher:** Jaime Bolaños/Sea Vida

**Species:** Various

**Team:** Olga Herrera, Jimmy Bolaños

During the last five years, the “Sociedad Ecológica Venezolana Vida Marina” (Sea Vida) has been promoting responsible Whale Watching (WW) in Venezuela. Currently, Dolphin Watching (DW) is being offered in two regions: 1) State of Aragua (in the Central Coast of Venezuela) and 2) Mochima National Park (MNP, states of Anzoátegui and Sucre, northeastern Venezuela). According to the general guidelines for ecotourism and/or responsible WW, both experiences can be considered different in nature and -if put together- provide a very good foundation for development of responsible whalewatching in Venezuela. Firstly, whale watching at the MNP dates back to the early 90's and has consolidated thanks to a successful marketing strategy and tourism infrastructure, but lacks scientific research or monitoring, education, training of human resources and participation of local communities. In the second place, from the point of view of commercial results, WW in the State of Aragua cannot be considered successful, but counts on ongoing scientific research efforts, public awareness and education, training of human resources and participation of local communities. Operators from these two regions have benefited from the experience gained previously in the other



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Marine tucuxi or Guiana dolphins are one of the most commonly sighted dolphins off the coast of Venezuela.

region.

Some level of WW –mainly DW- seems to occur in other regions of Venezuela, but so far it has not been evaluated. Apparently, DW is offered or promoted as part of nature tours. Such places include the Lake of Maracaibo (*Sotalia guianensis*), Mochima Town (*Delphinus capensis*), eastern coast of the Sucre State (probably *D. Capensis* and/or other cetacean species), the Orinoco River Delta and Ciudad Bolívar (*Inia geoffrensis* and probably *Sotalia guianensis*)

Since late 2005, WW has been included among

the priorities of three programs of the People's Ministry of Science and Technology (MppCT): 1) National Program on Biotrade, 2) Innovative Social Production

**“...whale watching at the MNP dates back to the early 90's and has consolidated thanks to a successful marketing strategy and tourism infrastructure...”**

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Biologist Jaime Bolanos in the role of a naturalist guide for students of the UNEFA university in Cata Bay, State of Aragua.

Networks and 3) Popularization of Science. Also, a proposal of regulations for WW was presented by Sea Vida to the Ministry of Environment in early 2004 and again in 2005, and is currently under review.

## Aims and Objectives.

This project has been designed to assess the current status of whale watching in Venezuela, with emphasis on the potential of socio-economic benefits. Specific objectives are:

- To assess the socio-economic benefits of WW in “Ocumare de la Costa de Oro” and Puerto la Cruz.

- To ascertain the level of WW in the Lake of Maracaibo (southern and northern tips, States of Mérida and Zulia), Mochima Town, Río Caribe Town (State of Sucre), Ciudad Bolívar (State of Bolívar) and Delta Amacuro.
- To provide authorities with elements to value the role of WW as a key element of management of biological diversity and development of local communities.

## Method

Socio-economic benefits of WW will be evaluated and analysed according to the questionnaire model developed by Hoyt (2001). The field work includes interviews with local operators and governmental tourism management agencies in localities such as Maracaibo, Mérida, Ocumare de la Costa de Oro, Puerto la Cruz, Mochima, Río Caribe, Delta Amacuro and Ciudad Bolívar. When possible, as it is the case in Puerto la Cruz city and Mochima Town, opportunistic surveys will be made aboard commercial trips to collect information on dolphin sightings.

In the short-medium term, it is expected that increased awareness and support from authorities (Ministries and regional agencies of Science and Technology, Environment and Tourism, respectively) would be capital for consolidation of responsible WW in these and other regions of the country.

## Update from the Field

Between November 2007-January 2008, field trips were made to north-eastern and north-western Venezuela to interview and present the questionnaire to local tour operators. Up to now, locations visited include Bahía de Cata (State of Aragua), Puerto la Cruz (State of Anzoátegui), Cumaná city and Mochima Town (State of Sucre), Maracaibo (State of Zulia) and Mérida (State of Mérida). Questionnaires were also sent to 12 tour operators in the State of Bolívar. The names and addresses of several operators were searched previously in the internet.

## Results

- According to results, at least 9000 tourists went dolphin watching in Venezuela, during 2007. Regions visited by tourists include the States of Aragua,



Fisherman Mr Jose ("Cata") Diaz completing his questionnaire.



Explaining the project to owners and personnel from Tyllandsia Tours, city of Mérida, State of Mérida.

Anzoátegui, Apure, Bolívar, Mérida, Sucre and Zulia.

- Total expenditures were approx. BsF 1.5 million (approx. US\$ 700,000).
- In Aragua, Anzoátegui, Bolívar and Sucre States, more than 90% of visitors were Venezuelans. In the States of Apure, Mérida and Zulia, more than 90% were Europeans.
- Several tour operators in the States of Anzoátegui, Mérida, Sucre and Zulia count on more than 20 years

**"Total [whale watching] expenditures were...\$700,000"**

of experience.

## Conclusions:

1. Dolphin-watching in Venezuela is more widespread than previously thought.
2. Dolphin-watching in Venezuela includes both marine and freshwater species.
3. Dolphin-watching has been offered during, at least, the last 20-25 years in several regions of Venezuela.
4. Only in Aragua dolphin-watching operations have been preceded by scientific research.
5. Because of the lack of several key components,

dolphin-watching operations in the states of Apure, Anzoátegui, Bolívar, Mérida, Sucre and Zulia cannot be considered sustainable.

## Recommendations:

- Current commercial operations in the states of Apure, Anzoátegui, Mérida, Nueva Esparta, Sucre and Zulia should be evaluated and supervised by interested parties and relevant authorities. According to Venezuelan regulations, it should be a "Specific Environmental Evaluation" or "Environmental Impact Assessment".
- We recommend the design and development of a "National Strategy for development of responsible whalewatching".
- Because of the importance of participation of such authorities as the Ministries of Environment, Science and Technology and Tourism, the regulatory instrument to be promoted should be a Presidential Decree.

The results of this project have been very timely and valuable for the Latin America Whale Watch Report by Hoyt and Iñíguez (2008) as it has helped to add depth to their comparative analysis for whalewatching activities in Venezuela, see website link below for further information:

[http://www.wdcs-de.org/docs/WW\\_Latinamerica\\_English.pdf](http://www.wdcs-de.org/docs/WW_Latinamerica_English.pdf)