

## RESEARCH NOTE

### WHALE WATCHING IN NORWAY CAUGHT BETWEEN MORE TRADITIONAL HUNTING CANONS AND THE LUCRATIVE PROMISE OF SEISMIC AIRGUNS

GIOVANNA BERTELLA\* AND HEIKE IRIS VESTER†‡§

\*School of Business and Economics, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

†Georg-August University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany

‡Max Planck Institute for Dynamics and Self-Organization, Göttingen, Germany

§Faculty of Aquaculture and Biosciences, University of Nordland, Bodø, Norway

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This research note concerns the role of whale-watching tourism providers in the debate over protection of the marine environment. The case reported is about northern Norwegian whale-watching organizations. Based on the analysis of local newspapers and on the direct experience of one member of our research team, this research note concludes that the whale-watching companies, and more in general the wildlife tourism companies, engage only marginally in the debate. This can be explained referring to the companies' limited availability of resources and experience in the field, and to the existence of different perspectives relative to the way humans can use and impact the marine environment and its inhabitants.

Key words: Whale watching; Environmental protection; Sustainability

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#### Introduction

The aim of this Research Note is to reflect on the role of whale-watching tourism providers as active participants in the debate over protection of the marine environment.

Whale-watching tourism has often been presented by academicians and environmentalists as

an attractive economic activity, and, in some cases, as a good alternative to whaling (Cunningham, Huijbens, & Wearing, 2012; Hoyt & Hvenegaard, 2002; Higham & Lusseau, 2008; Kuo, Chen, & McAleer, 2012; Neves, 2010; Parsons & Draheim, 2009).

Recently, several scholars from various disciplines have problematized the beneficial aspect and

the sustainability of tourism, with some attention also paid to whale watching (Fennel & Weaver, 2005; Higham, Bejeder, & Williams, 2014; Moscardo & Murphy, 2014; Scarpaci & Parsons, 2014). They raise the question of whether whale-watching tourism can live up to expectations in terms of its potential and beneficial effects.

Although recognizing the importance of discourse and trends at the macrolevel, this article focuses on the local level, viewing local discourse and actions as main drivers of the development and practice of whale-watching tourism (Lawrence & Phillips, 2004).

This article investigates which role the northern Norwegian whale-watching organizations play in the protection of the marine environment and its inhabitants. This issue has acquired particular relevance since the first marine oil and gas exploitation surveys in whale-watching areas began in 2007. Based on the assumption that in critical moments the role played by involved actors emerges more clearly, this study investigates the debate around these recent events.

#### A Brief Presentation of Whale Watching in Northern Norway

Since its beginning in 1988, whale-watching tourism in northern Norway has operated in a turbulent context. Norway is among the few countries that do not follow the 1986 International Whaling Commission ban. In northern Norway, a marked cultural resistance against adopting the global view of whales as animals to be protected and not hunted has been reported (Kalland, 1993; Ris, 1993).

Although these reports date back to the beginning of the 1990s, today the same resistance can also be noted. An illustration of the local position on whaling is an episode from July 2014, when a regional online newspaper reported a public transport boat's observation of people suspected to be related to the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (Nikolaisen, 2014). Online readers' comments show the strong emotional reaction to this episode by some local people who seem to fear antiwhaling actions and declare readiness to counteract, sometimes with the use of violence.

In 2014, extensive oil and gas exploration surveys were conducted farther along the northern coast of

the country, close to the area where whale watching occurs. Loud explosions caused by seismic airguns are used to search for oil and gas, which can cause physical damage and behavioral changes leading to reduction of survival success for marine mammals (Weilgart, 2013). These events add a new dimension to the debate around the use of the marine environment for human activities, and have led to reactions from locals, as shown by the spontaneous street manifestations against seismic investigations that took place in Andfjorden in fall 2014 (Wilhelmine Revheim, 2014).

#### Method Adopted in the Empirical Investigation

The secondary data sources are: the main newspaper of northern Norway (*Nordlys*), the regional section of the main Norwegian news channel (*NRK Nordnytt*), and two local newspapers relative to the area where whale watching has traditionally occurred (*Lofotposten*, *Vesterålen Online*). The online versions of these information sources from the year 2014 (January–October) were analyzed. In order to identify the most discussed topics, attention was paid to the amount of posts that the articles had received by the readers. The search words used to collect the data were relative to oil and gas exploitations and whales, and also to fisheries as the traditional economic activity dependent on the marine environment.

In total 144 articles were collected (see Table 2). Each article was categorized with respect to the main topic, being: a) oil and gas exploitation, b) the local presence of whales, or c) both. For each category the main themes were identified, together with the mentioned actors. Eight articles had received numerous online comments by the readers (see Table 3). The posts of these articles were also analyzed focusing on content and tone.

Additional data come from first-person experience of one of our research team. This person is a biologist and manager of a nonprofit local organization concerning whale research and education and conducting whale-watching tourism from 2006 to 2011.

#### Findings

Table 1 shows a list of the whale-watching companies. It also includes companies that organize other

Table 1  
Whale-Watching and Wildlife-Watching Companies, Research and Education Organizations in Northern Norway

Whale-Watching Companies	Wildlife-Watching Companies	Nonprofit Organizations
Whalesafari Andenes: boat tours, education, research	Rib Lofoten: rib boat sea eagles safaris	Ocean Sounds (founded in 2005 as a research and tourism company; NGO since 2014): education, whale research (acoustics)
Sea Safari Andenes: rib boat tours, wildlife boat safaris	Lofoten Explorer: rib boat sea eagles safaris Lofoten Opplevelser: rib boat sea eagles safaris Puffin Safari: rib boat puffin and sea eagles safaris Stø Safari: rib boat sea and seal safaris Lofoten Charterboat: rib boat sea eagles safaris	Marefa: wildlife walks, education, research

marine-life safaris and the whale-related research and education organizations in northern Norway.

The data from the press are significant for the understanding of the view of whales held by locals, and the identification of those especially active in discussions of recent oil and gas exploitation and the marine environment—particularly the local presence of whales. Table 2 summarizes the findings in relation to these aspects.

As shown in Table 2 (see topic Whales and the relative main themes and actors), there is no univocal way by the locals to view the whales. Whales are seen as prey, food, and a tourist attraction, appreciated also by the locals who, in some cases, seem to recognize the individuality of specific animals and care about their welfare.

Considering the total amount of articles (144), the issue of the effects of oil and gas exploitation and

Table 2  
The Main Topics, Themes, and Actors Discussed and Mentioned in the Articles

Main Topic	No. of Articles	Main Themes	Main Actors
Oil and gas	87	Opportunities (especially in terms of local jobs), skepticism and critics (concerning the natural environment and fisheries)	Local and national politicians, local municipalities, Norwegian Oil and Gas Association, Norwegian Petroleum Directorate, Statoil, Eni, Geology Governmental Agency, Institute of Marine Research, University of Bergen, Directorate of Fisheries, Norwegian Fishermans Association, Local nonprofit association against oil, Bellona, Greenpeace
Whales	50	Tourism resources, whaling and food, amenity for the locals, interest and care shown towards individual animals	Whalesafari Andenes, local community, Ocean Sounds
Oil and gas + whales	7	Possible negative effects of seismic to whales	Whalesafari Andenes, Marefa, Ocean Sounds

the whales has a marginal role (7 articles, see the topic Oil and gas + whales in Table 2) but, simultaneously, seems to be the most discussed (6 articles, see the most commented topics in Table 3).

The analysis of the content of the articles about oil and gas and whales (see the topic Oil and gas + whales and the main actors in Table 2) shows that Whalesafari Andenes is the only wildlife-watching tourism company joining these discussions, with its leader being interviewed and expressing explicitly his point of view. Whalesafari Andenes is the biggest and oldest whale-watching tourism company of the area and is also active in research and educational activities as well as collaboration with some research groups. In the past such collaboration included also the local organization Marefa.

Although not a tourism company, Ocean Sounds has worked in whale-watching tourism from 2006 to 2011 and also appears as an active participant to the discussions, along with Marefa (see the topics Oil and gas + whales and the relative main actors in Table 2).

The analysis of the six articles that have received many comments by the readers (see Table 3) shows that although Whalesafari Andenes, Ocean Sounds, and Marefa are explicitly concerned about the welfare of the animals and engaged in research and educational activities relative to the marine environment and in particular the whales, there is no agreement among them on the dimensions or hazardous aspect of the oil and gas activities. From the articles it appears that the whale-watching company is skeptical of the research organizations' position in indicating a high probability of short and long-term damage to the animals such as hearing damage, behavioral changes, movement out of the fjord, and changes in whales' feeding area. Such skepticism by the whale-watching tourism company leader is expressed in the interview reported in the articles and more openly in the posts, where some doubts

on the competence of the specific researchers and the research environment in general are raised.

Although not directly involved in the debate on the newspapers, the other local whale-watching company, Sea Safari Andenes (see Table 1), has been observed as engaged in discussing the issue of the potential effects of the seismic activities on the whales, being supportive of the scientific studies and their concerns. Such engagement and support have been explicitly manifested during a seminar about whales and seismic activity held in July in the village of Henningsvær.

### Conclusion

This Research Note concludes by highlighting the following aspects:

- The representation of locals' perception of whales exclusively as prey and food has not been confirmed (see the topic Whales and the relative themes and actors in Table 2).
- The vision according to which whale watchers, and more in general wildlife watchers, are particularly concerned about the environment in comparison to other categories has not been confirmed (see the topics Oil and gas and Oil and gas + whales and the relative main actors in Table 2 in comparison with the wildlife watchers identified in Table 1).
- Some whale-watching companies, and more in general wildlife-watching companies, engage in research and educational activities and also in environmental debates more than others (see the identified wildlife-watching companies presented in Table 1 and those mentioned in Table 2). This might depend on years of experience and available resources.
- Although the inclusion of research activities in whale-watching tourism is desirable, the skeptical

Table 3

The Articles and the Topics That Had Received the Highest Number of Posts by the Readers

The Most Commented Articles and Topics

Six articles on two newspapers about the possible negative effects of seismic to whales (147 posts)  
 One article about the municipalities' position against the oil and gas exploitation (43 posts)  
 One article about the request by a local nonprofit association to stop the seismic activities (33 posts)

position that some whale-watching providers can have towards science can lead to a climate of mistrust and confusion (as emerged in the analysis of the content of the most commented articles about the possible negative effects of seismic to whales and the relative posts, Table 3).

- The perception of the sustainability platform as the “right” approach to environmental issues and the related view of the whales as a resource are dominant. Alternative and less-anthropocentric world-views are almost absent (note such an absence among the main themes about the topic Oil and gas in Table 2).

#### Biographical Notes

Giovanna Bertella is an Associate Professor at the School of Business and Economics, The Arctic University of Norway. Her research interests are: small-scale tourism, food tourism, rural tourism, nature-based tourism, active tourism, event management, tourism entrepreneurship, knowledge, and networks. Since 2014 she has been a member of the research program Northern InSights.

Heike Iris Vester is a Ph.D. Candidate at Georg-August University of Göttingen and Max Planck Institute for Dynamics and Self-Organization, Germany, and University Lecturer at the Faculty of Aquaculture and Biosciences, University of Nordland in Bodø, Norway. She is the founder and manager of Ocean Sounds e.v., Henningsvaer, Norway. Her research interests are: social and vocal behavior of social matrilineal whales, mechanisms of social intelligence and behavior, vocal repertoire and language studies of cetaceans, influences, and adaption to changing environments.

#### Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Irene Barnard for proofreading the manuscript.

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