The North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) convened an international workshop in La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico, from March 22 to 23, 2001. The workshop’s stated objectives were to assess the potential for sustainable tourism to be a tool for biodiversity conservation, to develop a framework for sustainable whale watching in 1 of 14 CEC priority regions (from Baja California, Mexico, to the Bering Sea) as a case study, and to present preliminary results of the state and extent of nature-based tourism in North America (North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, 2001). Stakeholders were invited from Canada, the United States, and Mexico and represented local governments, nongovernmental organizations, local communities, the tourism industry, tour operators, and academic sectors.

The CEC selected whale watching in North America as a case study for the workshop to build on conservation initiatives throughout North America. The relevant initiatives to foster conservation and to protect and enhance the North American environment are as follows:

- the CEC’s project for the development of a North American marine protected areas (MPAs) network to facilitate the future design, management, exchange of information, and strategies of a North American MPA system;
- the CEC’s Bight of the Californias Global Programme of Action pilot project to address land-based point and nonpoint sources of marine environment degradation;
- the project for the establishment of a transboundary MPA in Puget Sound and the southern Strait of Georgia funded through the CEC’s North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation; and
- the CEC-supported Baja California to Bering Sea Marine Conservation Initiative (also known as the B2B Initiative) convened by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society to establish a linked network of MPAs together
with other conservation strategies on the west coast of North America (Canada, the United States, and Mexico).

The CEC’s project on sustainable tourism was started in 1998 (North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, 2000) and is an opportunity to link the above-mentioned North American conservation initiatives in protected and nonprotected natural areas. This project could help Canada, Mexico, and the United States develop avenues for cooperation and perhaps even a common framework for the promotion of sustainable development through nature-based tourism. Underlying the economic benefits of development is a joint commitment to the protection of the ecosystems that attract tourists to natural areas (North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, 1999).

The workshop was opened by the conveners, Hans Herrmann and Chantal Line Carpentier (of the CEC), who explained that sustainable tourism is part of the CEC’s work on several green services and goods, including shade-grown coffee, renewable energy, and sustainable Chamaedora palm. All these are strategies that pursue the twin goals of conservation and economic opportunity.

The workshop dealt with the economic, social, legal, scientific, and educational aspects of sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and whale watching. An overview of previous whale watching workshops and conferences was presented. The whale watching issue was once analyzed in mainly academic conferences, and the discussion was brought to multistakeholder workshops. The latter have allowed the application of a more holistic approach to whale watching research and management in Canada.

Ecotourism (including whale watching) tour operators from western Canada (the Vancouver area); Baja California Sur, Mexico; and Alaska presented examples of their local success and failure stories. In all of these areas, there are beautiful sites and wildlife viewing possibilities where hundreds of companies make their profits, although for a limited time of the year. Workshop participants pointed out that during the ecotourism trips offered by these tour operators, education of the public and community involvement should be included because they are important for the conservation of the wildlife on which tour operators depend.

Regarding the demand and economic benefits of ecotourism and whale watching, research results showed that the market is growing very fast in all of North America. The market is composed of wildlife watchers in the United States who are middle aged, have high incomes, and are college educated. The market in all of North America, however, is not as homogenous, so different management approaches are neces-

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1. A complete revision of sustainable tourism and ecotourism definitions is available from the CEC (1999).
sary. Furthermore, the conservation of ecotourism sites is a challenge in Mexico because poverty puts pressure on natural resources for consumption.

Biologists presented their general perspective on whale watching and the results of research in San Ignacio Lagoon and Ensenada, Mexico. There are differing degrees of understanding of the biology of target species. Although some short-term effects on whales by whale watching boats have been noted, their biological significance and the measurement of long-term effects are difficult to assess and require several years of research. Therefore, the industry should proceed carefully in the expansion of activities by identifying the minimal information they need to know to minimize the effect of whale watching on cetaceans and other wildlife by supporting and promoting research on those effects and by establishing completely protected areas where species are engaged in critical biological activities such as calving and nursing.

Workshop participants discussed regulations and standards for whale watching. As in other meetings regarding the legal aspects of nature tourism, the discussion centered on the adoption of regulations or guidelines (binding vs. nonbinding legislation). The preferred option is probably a combination of both approaches. Self-regulation through guidelines is supported by the education of tour operators and tourists in whale watching areas.

MPAs and their links to the Baja-to-Bering initiative were mentioned. Whale watching appears to be a minor issue in MPAs, especially those that cover large regions and are required to conserve and manage diverse species, habitats, and human activities (e.g., the El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve in Mexico).

Community participation is an important tool for ecosystem and whale watching management. In Canada’s Race Rocks MPA, an advisory board with all stakeholders works in a consensus framework for conflict resolution and to recommend boating guidelines. In Mexico, conservation and community development should be based on autonomy, self-sufficiency and product diversification. Community members in Baja California Sur have been successfully trained as naturalist guides. Once communities decide how they wish to develop, they must find financing opportunities for their activities. Some international foundations provide loans to ecological businesses that foster grassroots economic development and biodiversity conservation among low-income communities.

Education helps bring together conservation and wildlife-based recreation. Tourists must improve their conduct near sensitive species and areas. Different communications media, such as pamphlets, wildlife viewing guides, signs on sites, and the Internet, can accomplish this.

2. According to workshop participant David Barkin, an economist and professor at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City.
Certification was presented as a means of a market-based strategy to promote nature-sensitive tourism. The principles and elements of ecotourism certification procedures (known as the Mohonk Agreement) were agreed on during a Ford Foundation–sponsored workshop in New Paltz, New York. However, ecotourism certification is still controversial because the procedure should be transparent, and public awareness of ecolabels (to shift the preferences toward certified tourist products) is difficult to achieve.

On the basis of the information presented, the workshop identified opportunities in three aspects of sustainable tourism: management and MPAs, socioeconomic aspects, and educational opportunities.

With regard to management and marine protected areas,

1. The CEC should continue the B2B Initiative as a multistakeholder effort and strongly encourage this initiative to incorporate a focus on tourism. Furthermore, the CEC should promote, fund, and facilitate regular sectoral meetings under (or within) the B2B Initiative, including but not limited to MPA managers, tour operators, and others.
2. During the meetings of the B2B Initiative regarding tourism, broad guidelines for an ecoregional planning framework should be established that include both protected and nonprotected areas as well as infrastructure, physical facilities, and zoning concepts.

With regard to socioeconomic aspects,

1. Whale watching must be expanded into shoulder seasons. Shoulder seasons are those few weeks just before and after a whale watching season during which viewing is less certain, but it might still be worth going out to sea.
2. Whale watching should be redefined as part of the larger experiential tourism market.
3. To achieve the above-mentioned recommendations, tour operators and other stakeholders must promote whale watching and accomplish target marketing.
4. Investment in infrastructural improvements by tour operators is necessary to expand capacity and limit inputs.
5. The control and benefits of experiential tourism should achieve a social integration at the community level.
6. Stakeholders must develop a tourism model that respects social demands and economic realities.
7. Consumers must be educated to prefer a better infrastructure than what is offered today, social integration at the community level, and respect for social demands and economic realities.

3. The Mohonk Agreement is an agreed framework and set of principles for the certification of ecotourism and sustainable tourism. An unpublished summary is available from Guy Chester, GHD Management Engineering Environment (e-mail: gchester@ghd.com.au).
With regard to educational opportunities,

1. Educationally committed stakeholders should identify their clients: Do they need to be guided, or can they be self-guided? Who are the promoters, authorities, community, and the industry?
2. A guide training template must be developed for whale watching.
3. A marketing code of ethics should be designed because too often, tourists are offered unrealistic experiences (e.g., touching a whale in an area where that does not occur).
4. Policy makers in the governments should also receive information and be educated with respect to whale watching issues and needs.
5. With respect to community education and outreach, the messages and materials should be consistent, clear, and appropriate to regions. Their information sources must be verified to be accurate.
6. Web sites must be designed consistently and with regional input to promote whale watching and inform about the logistics involved in accessing whale watching areas.
7. Signs must be posted at harbors, ramps, launch areas, and overlooks with information about the natural history of whales and best whale watching practices.

To complement these and other recommendations for the CEC, the participants, during a closing plenary session, added important advice for the future that can be summarized in two major areas:

1. Pilot demonstration projects regarding whale watching must be undertaken. This can be done through a transparent, competitive process in which CEC will seek private funds to invest in such projects. The pilot projects will be focused on a long-term basis (5 years).
2. A virtual information and education network must be created with the purpose of archiving and sharing information from this event and related conferences to inform stakeholders of current research and meetings and provide links to ecotourism information. This network will also serve as a forum for continued discussion. This will include an accessible database of legislation (including guidelines); research initiatives; an inventory of ecotourism attractions, facilities, and services; the identification of biological hot spots; and the creation of a directory of tour operators.

Finally, the workshop participants were encouraged to convince their governments (the environmental authorities) that the CEC should elevate tourism within its priorities because of the industry’s rapid growth and the expanding opportunities for nature conservation within a cooperative framework in the North American region. There are great opportunities for ecotourism to be an economically profitable activity in the Baja-to-Bering region; however, this planning must be done to integrate local communities and conserve species, ecosystems, and cultural heritage.
References


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