



Fin whales off Galley Head, County Cork

### 3. Education and awareness

Similar to research, education should be an integral part of developing responsible whalewatching. Information on the species and habitat being exploited should be available to whalewatchers and operators alike. Information on the legislation and guidelines such as any code of conduct etc should be promoted at all opportunities together with the sensitivity and conservation value of the site.

**Recommendation** Partnership agreements between stakeholders (operators, conservationists and state agencies) are the most effective system for managing whalewatching in Irish waters and should be established if more than one whalewatching vessel operates at a site. Whalewatching operators should be required to obtain training and certification to ensure they adopt good practices and can provide good wildlife interpretation.

### 4. Funding

Responsible and sustainable development of whalewatching requires a long-term funding commitment. The whalewatching industry could generate the funds necessary for monitoring of their activities through an environmental levy, which should be considered as an operating overhead.

#### More information

For more information on whalewatching in Ireland see: [www.iwdg.ie/whalewatching](http://www.iwdg.ie/whalewatching) and [www.shannondolphins.ie](http://www.shannondolphins.ie).

#### References

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**Recommendation** An environmental overhead on each person joining a whalewatching vessel should be promoted in order to fund research and monitoring programmes.

### 5. Monitoring

The effect of tourism activity on the cetacean species and habitat being exploited must be quantified and its impact assessed. This information is essential to determine carrying capacity, which is the amount of activity a species or habitat can be subjected to without affecting its long-term viability, and is the biological framework within which whalewatching should be managed. In order to develop responsible ecotourism, monitoring people and product satisfaction is also essential. Monitoring must be conducted in the long-term, which requires a regular commitment rather than through short-term, intensive studies.

**Recommendation** Long-term monitoring schemes should be put in place before whalewatching is widely promoted at a site. Monitoring schemes should measure parameters that are sensitive enough to detect change, at the appropriate scale, and must also be financially sustainable.

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The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group

# Policy on Whalewatching

*Dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of whales, dolphins and porpoises in Irish waters, through study, education and interpretation.*

*"Failte chuig lucht faire na míol mór, deilfeanna agus na muc mara ar chóstaí na hÉireann."*



Humpback whale lunge feeding off County Cork



Common dolphins are regularly seen on whalewatching trips along the south and west coasts.

## Irish Whale and Dolphin Group Policy on Whalewatching

Whalewatching\* is one of the fastest growing tourism industries in the world with an estimated growth between 1991 and 1998 of 12% per annum (Hoyt, 2000). In Ireland, whalewatching is estimated to be already worth €7.9 million per annum but the potential is still under-developed, especially off the south coast (Hoyt, 2000). The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) have identified at least four cetacean (whales, dolphins and porpoise) species in Ireland with good to excellent potential for developing a whalewatching industry including fin and humpback whales and common and bottlenose dolphins (Berrow, 2001).

The IWDG support the development of responsible whalewatching in Irish waters. Whalewatching can bring economic benefits to coastal communities and can enhance the conservation status and public awareness of cetaceans. However, all cetacean species in Ireland are protected and populations of some species are declining or rare and the subject of conservation measures. Other populations are still severely depleted after decades of over-exploitation. In order to achieve the development of responsible whalewatching, which brings positive benefits to people and cetaceans, planning is required. This document outlines the IWDG policy on whalewatching and provides recommendations on appropriate frameworks to ensure responsible whalewatching in Ireland.

### Whalewatching in Ireland

The majority of the estimated 177,600 whalewatchers in Ireland in 1998 visited the wild, solitary, bottlenose dolphin in Dingle Harbour, Co Kerry. This dolphin has been in the harbour since 1984, however this whalewatching is not sustainable as it is based on one dolphin, which will eventually die or move away.

Whalewatching on bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon estuary started in 1993 and by 1995 around 2,500

people were visiting West Clare to see the dolphins. In 1999 visitor numbers increased to 4,000 and in 2000 there was a 300% increase to about 12,000 people. Whalewatching was estimated to be worth between €108,000-241,000 to the local economy in 1997-98 (Berrow and Holmes, 1999). Around 450-500 trips, catering for 15-20,000 people were carried out each year between 2001 and 2003. Since 2000 the Shannon estuary has been designated a candidate Special Area of Conservation for bottlenose dolphins under the EU Habitats Directive. Under this legislation, the operation

Land-based whalewatching from Cape Clear Island, Co.Cork



of commercial recreational activities such as whalewatching is a notifiable activity and all persons must obtain the written consent of the Minister of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

A dedicated whalewatching operator has recently become established off southwest Ireland, operating from Castletownshend in County Cork with a range of species being watched, from common, bottlenose and Risso's dolphins and minke, fin and humpback whales. In addition a number of angling and diving boats around the country are advertising whale and dolphin watching as part of a marine wildlife trip. Land-based whalewatching is popular and widespread all around the island of Ireland. Dedicated whalewatching weekends on Cape Clear and Tory Islands have been organised by the IWDG. To date over 300 people have attended these weekends which can make a significant contribution to these islands' economy.

\* Whalewatching is defined "as any commercial enterprise which provides for the public to see cetaceans in their natural habitat (IWC, 1994).



Watching bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon estuary

Visitor surveys (Berrow and Whooley, 1999; Berrow et al. 2004) have shown that the present market for whale-watching is mainly within Ireland, accounting for around 60% of those interviewed. However, whale-watching is also an important attraction for overseas visitors. For example, in a survey carried out in Dingle in 1999, 42% of overseas people interviewed said that the dolphin was the main reason for visiting the town, with 5% stating the dolphin was the main reason they decided to holiday in Ireland. In a survey carried out in Kilrush, County Clare in 2003, 30% of those inter-

Bottlenose dolphin - adult and calf



viewed said the dolphins were a major factor for coming to County Clare and 68% a major factor in them coming to Kilrush. Nearly 15% of those people attending whalewatching weekends on Cape Clear travelled over from the UK. Whalewatching offers a potentially very important tourism product for attracting people into Ireland.

## Framework required for responsible whalewatching

The IWDG recommends a number of factors must be considered to ensure whalewatching is responsible and sustainable in Ireland and does not displace cetaceans or degrade their habitat. These factors should be modified for each location and species involved but each element should be in place. This framework can also be applied to other marine wildlife tourism (see Berrow, 2001).

We recommend the following factors should be considered in a framework designed to develop responsible whalewatching:

### 1. Regulations and Legislation

Voluntary guidelines (e.g. Codes of Conduct) can be very effective in minimising disturbance to cetaceans but they may not always be strong enough to control potentially damaging activities. To date, the Habitats Directive is the only legislation that has been used to manage whalewatching in Irish waters and this is restricted to sites designated as Special Areas of Conservation e.g. Shannon estuary. Codes of Conduct must be developed for each site independently and in consultation with operators and other stakeholders but drawing on the experience of sites elsewhere.

**Recommendation** Irish legislation needs to be reviewed to identify its' potential for managing whalewatching operations outside of designated marine protected areas. The government must develop the capacity to issue licenses as this is the most successful means of regulating whalewatching.

### 2. Research

There is a lack of basic information on the ecology of cetaceans in Irish waters and the impact of tourism. All cetacean species in Irish waters are legally protected, but many species, that could form the basis for whale-watching in Ireland, are also depleted after over-exploitation and thus conservation is a priority. Research should be an essential element of whale-watching and whalewatching vessels offer a very important platform with which to carry out research. Research can enhance the tourism experience and studies have shown that whalewatchers are willing to pay more if a proportion of the money funds research.

**Recommendation** Tour boat operators should be encouraged to provide a platform for research on the species involved in whalewatching. This research should support conservation management and be available for education and awareness initiatives by operators and their customers.