

Swimming with Flipper: Education with Wild Dolphins in Aotearoa New Zealand

Humans have a special bond with dolphins. We can all relate to these happy smiling creatures, even though they are not really smiling (it is just the shape of their beak that makes them look as if they were smiling).

For many, seeing dolphins in their natural habitat is a wonderful experience, but being able to swim with these creatures is the ultimate once in a lifetime opportunity. In many countries, national marine mammal protection regulations do not allow swimming with wild dolphins, but there are places where you can do so. Despite relatively tight Marine Mammal Protection Act and Marine Mammal Protection Regulations, New Zealand does allow a number of licenced operators to take tourists out on the ocean and swim with wild dolphins. Depending on the location, you can swim with Bottlenose dolphins (Flipper was one of those), Common dolphins, Dusky dolphins, and even the very rare and endemic Hector's dolphin.



Most dolphin operators in New Zealand identify as eco-tour operators, which means they are complying with a number of requirements regarding the natural environment. They try to keep the negative impacts on the environment in general, and the viewed dolphins in particular, to a minimum.

For example, in compliance with New Zealand's Marine Mammal Protection Regulations (1992), operators travel at no-wake speed within 300 meters of dolphins, have no more than three boats at any one time within 300 meters, approach only from behind or parallel to the animals, so that the path of dolphins will not be obstructed or cut off by boats or swimmers.

In addition to these regulations, the majority of many ecotourism definitions and accreditation programs suggest that ecotourism takes place in natural, relatively undisturbed environments, and actively contributes to the protection and conservation of these environments. Ecotourism is supposed to generate benefits for the host communities, and respect the local people and cultures. It tries to operate in a sustainable way, and includes an educational component. In New Zealand, any tour company operating in the conservation estate, must include an educational component in their tours as part of the requirement to obtain a concession.



There are critics who argue that tourists are nothing but consumers, and all they want is being entertained. However, another school of thought argues that tourists not only accept an educational component during their holidays, but that they even desire educational opportunities.

In a study on three swim-with wild dolphins operators in New Zealand, tourists clearly showed a high degree of environmental consciousness, and a clear desire for information, regardless of their demographic background. While most participants acknowledged that they received excellent information about the dolphins they encountered during their tour, they indeed asked for more information about the wider marine environment, the role of the Department of Conservation (New Zealand's Crown agency managing the conservation estate), threats to the marine environment and the dolphins, climate change, and similar topics.

Indeed, 91.5% of the 733 respondents indicated that they enjoy learning during their holidays, 96.9% indicated that learning new things and increasing their knowledge is important for their holidays in general, and almost all participants believed that courses focusing on conservation of natural resources should be taught in primary and secondary schools.



In contrast to this very strong support for education, participants felt that the educational experience on their respective tours was not equally strong. While 76.7% agreed that the tours was an educational experience, only 63.3% thought that they learned a lot about dolphins, and a mere 21.6% said that they learned a lot about the wider marine environment. These results clearly indicate that the operators do have an educational component in place, and that they provide good information about the dolphins viewed, but that there is a need to widen their interpretation, and include related topics about the wider marine environment.

This is very encouraging, particularly because this request does not come from some hardcore “tree huggers”, but from the vast majority of “general” tourists on dolphin tours around New Zealand. These results also are encouraging for wildlife tour operators in other parts of the world, to put more emphasis on their interpretational components on the tours.

By Dr. Michael Lück (Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand)

Michael currently holds the position of Associate Professor in the School of Hospitality & Tourism, AUT University in Auckland, New Zealand. He is Head of Department (Tourism & Events), and an Associate Director of the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute (NZTRI), where he is responsible for the development of the coastal & marine tourism research programme area. Michael's research interests are in the wider area of marine tourism, with a focus on marine wildlife tourism and interpretation and education. He is also interested in ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and the impacts of tourism. He has published in international academic journals, and contributed to various books. He is the editor/co-editor of four books on ecotourism and marine tourism, the Encyclopedia of Tourism and Recreation in Marine Environments (CABI), the founding editor of the academic journal Tourism in Marine Environments, and Associate Editor of the Journal of Ecotourism. Contact: mlueck@aut.ac.nz

Date: 2009-10-26

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-swimming-with-flipper-education-with-wild-dolphins-in-aotearoa-new-zealand-article1007>