

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN RESPECTING AND EXPLOITING THE PHILIPPINES' WHALE SHARKS



The whale sharks of the Philippines are adored by the locals, especially on the island of Oslob where the “sea's gentle giants” – as they are affectionately known – have become a major draw for foreign visitors and led to fast growth in the Philippines tourism industry. Here hoards of visitors flock to the water to spend time with these incredible, 14 metre creatures on boat rides and \$10 snorkelling trip but even though there are tourist guidelines in place regarding the conduct of swimming with these sharks – such as no feeding and no touching – there are concerns about the effect that these “interactions” are having on the creatures.

Conservationists are deeply concerned about the impact that the shark's role as a tourist attraction could have on their safety and on the behaviour of their offspring. Whale sharks do not pose a threat to humans but it is feared that youngsters could get used to humans with regular close contact and feeding and become reliant on them instead of hunting for their own food. Furthermore, the increasingly close proximity of the boats could lead to injuries and these means calls are growing for greater protection.

The proposed solution is a greater balance between protection and enjoyment, but the ability to provide this is uncertain because of the sharks impact on Philippines tourism.

There needs to be a balance between using the sharks presence as a positive tourism tool and enjoying them and exploiting their presence and putting the animals at risk. Officials insist that whale safety, local tourism and revenue are all sustainable with the right balance and efforts and but the Philippines are part of international conventions for whale shark protection and the island's mayor has reminded business owners that he wants to protect the sharks and that there will be fines for those that violate restrictions.

The problem is that while this idea of balance and policing is great, there is a strong sentiment expressed by this small Philippines tourism community that suggests that this balance may not always be maintained. 90% of Oslob's economy comes from whale watching; many small businesses have boomed because of knock-on spending and the tourist presence in the area from all these visitors wanting to see the sharks and the industry needs these whale watchers around in order to continue. The community admit that while they do want to work with the conservationists and government measures, they will always put their families and businesses first if there are signs of trouble, which may mean getting closer to the sharks.

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