



# Whale Heritage Site Criteria

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## Introduction

The Whale Heritage Site (WHS) program is an initiative created by the World Cetacean Alliance, and currently run in partnership with World Animal Protection, to formally recognise and accredit destinations around the world that support and demonstrate the importance of cetaceans and their ocean habitats.

These sites empower and defend the right of local communities to care for and protect whales, dolphins and porpoises through a collaborative management partnership. They showcase an entire community and their relationship with the ocean by encouraging respectful human-cetacean coexistence - celebrating cetaceans in local culture, arts and events; supporting local economic and environmental sustainability; and developing locally based science, research and education.

Whale Heritage Site status is granted to places where people are able to work collaboratively within their communities to make and enforce decisions that will benefit cetaceans and their habitats in the long term.

For the travel industry, Whale Heritage Sites provide a clear marker to help identify and support sustainable practices and create a platform for communities to engage with marine culture, heritage and biodiversity. For tourists WHSs provide a transparent and easy way to select responsible whale and dolphin watching holiday destinations, encouraging them to experience these incredible animals in their natural habitat, in an authentic and responsible way.

## Background

Cetaceans have played an important role in human culture for millennia. Dating back to prehistoric eras, their significance is reflected in Neolithic paintings on caves and cliffs. Revered as deities, guides, protectors and our ancestral spirits, people have sung about and celebrated cetaceans in myths, legends and true stories all over the world. To this day humans continue to be curious and enamoured by cetaceans, publishing hundreds of scientific papers and popular articles each year, supporting conservation activities, and participating in a rapidly growing whale and dolphin tourism industry.

Nevertheless, this relationship has frequently been exploitative, with subsistence hunting taking place for centuries as a source of sustenance, and a commercial whaling industry that began in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century triggering widespread population declines, many of which have yet to recover.

From the 1960s onwards, however, our perspective on cetaceans changed. Intensive scientific studies undertaken with both wild and captive animals provided profound insights into cetacean intelligence and began to reveal how they teach, learn, cooperate, scheme and grieve. Along with early recordings

of their songs, a growing awareness of cetacean natural history and the Save the Whales movement of the 1970s and 80s led to a heightened interest in these charismatic mammals, and created a growing demand to see them in the wild.

Whale-watching, the practice of observing cetaceans in their natural habitats, began in the United States of America in the 1950s and has become a valuable tourist activity worldwide. A source of considerable scientific research, an educational platform for millions of people to learn about ocean conservation, and an important contributor to the creation of income for local communities, responsible whale-watching is now seen as an ethical alternative to holding cetaceans in captivity.

The WCA believes that the development of a network of WHS, designated against well-developed and robust criteria, can play an important role in distinguishing areas where cetaceans and people exist in harmony. WHS will be confined to those places where human relationships with cetaceans are positive and not exploitative.

The Whale Heritage Site certification is a replicable solution demonstrating that with a local focus underpinned by global cooperation, we can promote awareness, affect hearts and minds, and impact real change for cetaceans through education, sustainability, and conservation. Whale Heritage Sites deliver long-term protection for cetaceans and marine habitats, allowing people to witness these beautiful mammals for thousands more years into the future. They also ensure sustainable development for the coastal communities that depend on the sea, inspiring local people to value their whale and dolphin related heritage.

## **Complementary Site Networks**

WHS are designed to complement other international site networks, such as marine protected areas and national parks. For that reason, the World Cetacean Alliance acts with other managing authorities for relevant site processes to ensure that WHS complement, support and enhance them.

We anticipate that future WHS areas will incorporate biocentric (biological and ecosystem centred) processes under development for international areas including IMMAs (Important Marine Mammal Areas), EBSAs (Ecologically or Biologically Sensitive Marine Areas), KBAs (Key Biodiversity Areas), OECMs (Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures), designated cetacean critical habitats, and/or other schematics addressing cetaceans and their habitats.

## Definition

A Whale Heritage Site is an outstanding locations where cetaceans (whales, dolphins, or porpoises) are embraced through the cultural, economic, social, and political lives of associated communities, and where people and cetaceans coexist in an authentic and respectful way. Their aim is to preserve cetacean species and their habitats on a global scale so that they can survive and thrive for generations to come.

## Criteria

Criteria for WHS focuses on how people celebrate, benefit from, and seek to conserve the cetaceans with which they coexist. Each WHS may find its own unique means, appropriate to its local context, including geography, culture, economics, and politics, to satisfy the criteria with the required rigour. In meeting WHS criteria, a candidate site must take into account information relating to the relevant local cetacean populations including their status, numbers, biology, habitat, behaviour, and welfare. Overarching the criteria is the premise that WHS sites will promote respectful positive coexistence with cetaceans.

### 1. Encouraging Respectful Human-Cetacean Coexistence

The WHS has developed, and seeks to continually improve, a responsible framework managing the coexistence of people and cetaceans.

- 1.1 Guidelines and/or regulations related to the interactions between humans and cetaceans support international best practice and are appropriate to local context. Guidelines and/or regulations must be developed collaboratively by all of the key stakeholders, reviewed regularly, and clearly communicated to relevant audiences.
- 1.2 Guidelines and/or regulations are monitored by a minimum of two authorities, one of which can be advisory, but the other should be a responsible government body authorised to take effective action. There should be a clear process for any breaches including consequences for offenders.
- 1.3 Regular training takes place for skippers, crew, guides, onshore staff, and other stakeholders to ensure ownership and maintenance of responsible standards for interactions.
- 1.4 A permit system exists that manages and limits licences for cetacean interactions according to the best available local research and includes regular assessment and reapplication.
- 1.5 Mechanisms are in place to encourage ongoing reduction of any environmental impacts associated with watching cetaceans.

Four of the five sub-criteria must be met.

## **2. Celebrating Cetaceans**

The WHS celebrates the close cultural association between cetaceans and people.

- 2.1 Wild cetaceans are reflected in culture through historical or contemporary practices that harness a greater appreciation for living cetaceans in their natural habitats.
- 2.2 Cetacean-related festivals, ceremonies, meetings or other events that encourage a sense of pride, heritage, history, sustainability, and legacy are held annually.
- 2.3 Cetacean-related works of art are created, including in music, dance, and theatre; the visual arts, and in literature, from both written and spoken traditions.

Two of the three sub-criteria must be met.

## **3. Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability**

The WHS seeks to achieve an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable balance between the natural environment, the expectations of visitors, the needs of the local community and the businesses that operate there.

This balance is best achieved through engaging stakeholder representatives from government, the private sector, the local community and other relevant organisations, to collaborate on embedding effective policies and practices into the sustainable management of the Whale Heritage Site and the wider tourism industry in the destination.

**3.1 Economic sustainability** - sustainable livelihoods are created, generating employment and financial benefits, to provide a clear demonstration of the economic value of protecting cetaceans. This can be achieved directly (through whale-watching, tour guiding, research and conservation, etc.) and indirectly (through employment in cetacean tourism related services, such as arts festivals, exhibitions and other cultural events) but should include a balance of jobs (i.e., should ideally not be overly dominated by low paid, informal work).

**3.2 Social Sustainability** - local communities are recognised as key WHS stakeholders by:

3.2.1 Being given the opportunity to participate in decision-making at key stages.

- 3.2.2 Informed via press, social media or other means, about the Whale Heritage Site Candidacy and the rationale behind it.
- 3.2.3 Involved in preparing and maintaining the site for WHS status.
- 3.2.4 Engaged in educational and community outreach events that promote the WHS and the reasons for its existence.

3.3 **Environmental sustainability** - the marine and terrestrial ecosystems within the WHS must be maintained and preferably enhanced to support a thriving population of wild cetaceans.

- 3.3.1 Threats relevant to the primary cetacean habitat should be identified and an action plan developed to address those impacts within the control of local stakeholders.
- 3.3.2 A range of measures to enhance general environmental sustainability should be undertaken.

3.4 **Sustainable Destination Management** - to support achievement of all the above criteria, ensure continuous improvement and maintain the long term sustainability of the WHS, those responsible for the management of tourism in the location should ensure that there is an active and ongoing process to improve sustainability using recognised tools such as:

- The European Sustainable Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) developed by the European Commission.  
[http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable/indicators/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable/indicators/index_en.htm)
- The Global Sustainable Tourism Council's Criteria for Destinations (GSTC C-D).  
<https://www.gstcouncil.org/en/gstc-criteria/criteria-for-destinations.html>
- Or another Global Sustainable Tourism Council recognised destination management or accreditation scheme. <https://www.gstcouncil.org/en/gstc-partners-2/gstc-recognized-standards/recognized-standards-for-destinations.html>

Sub-criteria 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 must be met.

## 4. Research, Education and Awareness

The WHS recipient has developed, and seeks to continually improve, its commitment towards research, education and awareness.

- 4.1 Companies and organisations involved with cetacean interactions incorporate conservation-directed science and research programmes.

4.2 Conservation-based cetacean research and policy is showcased within the site.

4.3 Educational programmes that focus on cetaceans are delivered to local communities.

4.4 Local sustainability initiatives benefitting the marine environment are showcased.

Three of the four sub-criteria must be met.

## **Community collaboration**

One of the most unique aspects of the Whale Heritage Sites programme is that each site is entirely managed by local communities on their terms. Whilst anybody can apply to become a Whale Heritage Site, they can only make progress with their application by encouraging the involvement of stakeholders from across the site: forming a Steering Committee, communicating progress, and engaging with the wider community consistently. Provided that the Steering Committee can prove that the community supporting the application have the ability to implement and enforce management practices that will benefit cetaceans, they have every chance of submitting a successful application.

Although each Whale Heritage Site must meet robust criteria, the Whale Heritage Site Independent Review Panel (IRP) also look closely at the level of collaboration between individuals, community groups, NGO's, educational establishments, and local governments. Each WHS is on its own unique journey as it strives for continual improvement across the four required criteria. It can therefore appear that some sites have higher standards than others, but that ignores a key component of what makes a Whale Heritage Site – the potential to improve. The WHS judges assess this based on the community's willingness to work together and their ability to problem solve through the implementation of joint initiatives. This requirement is not based on wealth, and enables sites with weak financial resources but a strong collective will to be successful.

## **Process**

### **Delineation of Site**

In terms of scale and boundary, the responsible communities and/or governmental authorities will delineate the geographical boundaries of the WHS, including land and marine or fresh water. It is expected that sites will come in all sorts of sizes and shapes. The geographical and political boundaries will be reviewed by the Independent Review Panel (IRP) to verify that the area: is able to be administered economically, politically and geographically by the proposing entity/ies; is not designed

to avoid large polluters, captive cetacean facilities or other negative influences; and is able to be objectively regarded as a destination.

## Candidacy

There will be a five-tiered process: an initial online application, a candidacy review, an optional technical advice, a final application and then, if successful, Whale Heritage Site (WHS) designation.

- 1. Online initial application:** This questionnaire ensures there are no fundamental issues that preclude Whale Heritage Site candidacy. This may include situations where the coexistence of humans and cetaceans is considered harmful or compromises animal welfare. This questionnaire also provides us with some detailed information to enable us to better understand the strengths and areas for improvement in the proposed WHS.
  
- 2. Candidate review:** A review of the initial application is carried out by WCA representatives. Those sites that pass the Candidate review are then accepted as a Whale Heritage Site candidate and will receive a candidate logo licence agreement and a Steering Committee document to complete. It is essential that candidates send the completed Steering Committee document to the WCA at this point. This should include the names of individuals and organisations that would be willing to participate in the committee to take the Whale Heritage Site application forward.
  
- 3. Optional technical advice:** Once the Steering Committee document and the logo licence agreement have been received by the WCA, we offer two opportunities to gain advice to assist with the final application:
  1. General advice from the WCA Secretariat to discuss and advise on general areas for improvement and on how to submit an application with the greatest chance of success.
  2. Specialist advice from our technical team of experts on a specific criteria that the candidate site believes would be most beneficial.

Candidate Whale Heritage Site status will last for a maximum of three years before it is either revoked or renewed, or the site applies for full certification. During this period the site must submit annual reports summarising progress made towards full Whale Heritage Site status.

- 4. Final application:** At this point, the site is invited to submit the following information to the WHS Independent Review Panel (IRP) by receiving a link to enable the completion of a detailed online survey which will include:

- I. Supporting evidence (including statistics relevant to livelihoods, cultural activities, tourists visiting the area, whale-watch tour operators, protected areas, etc.) to enable the IRP to build a picture of the site.
- II. Justification for the geographical delineation of the site.
- III. A detailed explanation of how the site achieves each of the criteria.

This information will be reviewed by the WCA Secretariat. All information will then be presented to the Whale Heritage Site IRP for consideration. The IRP will evaluate the site against the criteria and either:

- 1) Award the site Whale Heritage Site status;
  - 2) Award the site Whale Heritage Site status upon the fulfilment of certain specific conditions; or
  - 3) Deny Whale Heritage Site status with recommendations.
- 5. Site designation:** The site has passed through the IRP and been designated as a Whale Heritage Site. It must then prepare and submit annual reports explaining how criteria are met, and will be subject to IRP review every three years. Designated sites will also receive an on-site audit in the first three-year period, and once every three years after that (see Site Audit Fee General Guidance document). Upon request and submission of evidence that the criteria are no longer being met, the site may be investigated and/or downgraded. Certified Whale Heritage Sites must show continual improvement through annual reporting as a measure of their excellence.

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<sup>i</sup> Of the 90 species currently known to science, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classifies four as Critically Endangered, eleven as Endangered, seven as Vulnerable, and ten as Near Threatened.