Whale Heritage Site
benefits

March 2022
What are Whale Heritage Sites?

The Whale Heritage Site (WHS) programme is a global initiative by the World Cetacean Alliance to formally recognise and accredit destinations where communities celebrate, respect and protect cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) and their habitats.

For the travel industry, Whale Heritage Sites act as a clear marker to identify and support sustainable practices and create a platform for communities to engage with marine culture, heritage and biodiversity.

For tourists, the Whale Heritage Site network provides a transparent and easy way to select outstanding whale and dolphin watching holiday destinations and encourages them to experience these incredible animals in their natural habitat, authentically and responsibly.

At its heart, though, the WHS programme empowers local communities to champion cetaceans in all walks of life.
Whale Heritage Sites and responsible tourism

Tourism accounts for a remarkable 10% of the global economy. Whale watching alone is a 2.1-billion-dollar industry, with 20 million people choosing to book whale watching excursions each year. The WHS programme was created with the recognition that, just as exploitative over-tourism can be damaging to the environment, sustainable and responsible tourism is able to have a significant positive impact.

Many of the world’s cetaceans live close to communities that rely heavily on income from tourism. Responsible tourism not only has the potential to support these communities economically, but it also encourages and allows them to invest in sustainability and environmental development programmes that benefit cetaceans and their habitats.

In addition to this, there has been a rising demand for responsible tourism in recent years, as tourists become more aware of the impact of their choices. For example, films like Blackfish have led to fewer people being comfortable with viewing cetaceans in captivity and a greater interest in ethical alternatives that allow them to see whales and dolphins in the wild instead. Tourists are also more eco-conscious than ever and are increasingly seeking out destinations and experiences based on sustainable and responsible criteria.
What are the positive impacts of Whale Heritage Sites?

The risks faced by whales, dolphins and porpoises worldwide continue to grow. Pollution, entanglement and climate change are just a few of the issues threatening cetaceans and their habitats. The WHS programme provides the model for a replicable solution.

Whale Heritage Sites demonstrate that a local focus, underpinned by global cooperation, has the power to raise awareness, affect hearts and minds, and achieve real change for cetaceans through education, sustainability and conservation.

By achieving WHS accreditation, each site enhances its reputation as a ‘gold standard’ destination for responsible whale watching, ensuring long-term protection for cetacean habitats, as well as generating economic and social benefits for local communities.

Accredited sites have seen sustainable practices and livelihoods continually improve through increased investment in responsible tourism, transforming these locations into places where both people and cetaceans can thrive.

In terms of education and culture, Whale Heritage Sites actively contribute towards cetacean research and can shape social attitudes through festivals, art projects, interpretive centres, and environmental education projects focused on cetaceans and their habitats.

Being part of the World Cetacean Alliance, the world’s largest marine conservation partnership, also has the advantage of exclusive promotion of WHS and the facilitation of knowledge sharing between sites.
What are the benefits of becoming a Whale Heritage Site?

The benefits for accredited Whale Heritage Sites fall into three key areas:

1. Economic
2. Environmental
3. Social

1. Economic benefits

Becoming a Whale Heritage Site can help provide significant economic support to a community as the result of increased tourism and investment.

WHS accreditation facilitates this by:

- Expanding the capacity, knowledge and experience of tourism industry stakeholders.
- Having a positive impact on other marine stakeholders, including fishing and diving communities.
- Creating local job opportunities.
- Providing a focal point for investment and funding from development, environmental or community-related funding streams.

- Improving livelihoods for marginalised coastal and fishing communities through tourism.
- Granting exclusive use of the WHS logo to all steering committee members and key stakeholders involved in the WHS initiative, making each site easily identifiable as one of the most responsible destinations in the world.
- Providing promotion by the World Cetacean Alliance through multiple resources, including the world’s first comprehensive Whale Watching Directory, and exclusive links with large tour operators.
Economic benefits case study:
The Bluff, South Africa

WHS accreditation raised awareness of the Bluff and put it on the map as an outstanding whale watching destination, drawing the attention of Transnet and Durban Tourism. This stimulated interest in the potential to develop the Bluff’s local whaling station as a centre for tourism, scientific research, and the local economy.

eThekwini Municipality has provided funding for two WHS viewing sites as part of their urban development, with plans for more. Sodurba Tourism started guided tours to the Bluff Whaling Station, which created job opportunities for The Whale Time guides.

The Bluff Whaling Station itself is now part of a large municipal development project for the Durban Harbour Entrance that aims to transform the station into a whaling museum and tourism hub. Funding for banners, flags, signage and mural art has been made available through eThekwini Economic Development and Sodurba CTO.
2. Environmental benefits

Whale Heritage Sites help to deliver long-term protection for cetaceans and their habitats, as well as creating sustainable development opportunities for local communities.

WHS accreditation can facilitate this by:

- Encouraging the development and strengthening of links between maritime users and educational and research facilities to further scientific knowledge.
- Encouraging responsible whale watching tourism that helps to improve animal welfare and conservation.
- Supporting and encouraging local initiatives that address threats to cetaceans and the environment.
- Helping to build the financial, legal, and political support needed to protect and conserve cetaceans for future generations.
- Raising awareness of the importance of protecting and conserving oceans and their biodiversity, and helping to protect critical habitats such as key areas for breeding, feeding and migration.
Environmental benefits case study:
Tenerife-La Gomera marine area, Spain

Since being granted WHS status, Tenerife-La Gomera has seen an increased interest from tourists about responsible whale watching and cetacean biodiversity.

The WHS has also acted as a focal point for lobbying and conservation. Government plans for a macro port on the coast, where pilot whales reside, would have seen a dramatic increase in boat and ship traffic. Press, activists, experts, and members of the public opposed to this construction all cited the WHS certification as a key argument against the proposal.
3. **Social benefits**

Becoming a Whale Heritage Site can inspire a community to truly value its relationship with the ocean through encouraging respectful human-cetacean coexistence, celebrating cetaceans in local culture, arts and events, and developing locally based education and awareness programmes.

Whale Heritage Site accreditation can facilitate this by:

- Promoting environmental education initiatives that help educate tourists and local people on the importance of sustainable practices and the value of responsible whale watching tourism.
- Helping boost climate change resilience for communities who are reliant on the marine environment.
- Improving community cohesion that fosters an interest in sustainability and a sense of pride towards marine natural heritage.
- Promoting and strengthening collaboration between different sectors of the community.
- Supporting alternative livelihoods that reduce dependency on declining fisheries by strengthening tourism and diversifying livelihoods.
- Sharing knowledge globally through communication between WHS destinations, enhancing their reputations and encouraging the sharing of learning and best practices.
Social benefits case study:

Hervey Bay, Australia

The steering committee for Hervey Bay WHS has observed that working towards and achieving accreditation has brought together all the various stakeholders from the community in an authentic way.

Prior to this, there was little to no communication between the whale watching fleet and other stakeholders.

As well as improved communication between regulators and the whale fleet, there has been more organisation of events that increase communication between researchers and the public, and the WHS steering committee itself, which acts as a central point to which all cetacean enquires can be directed.