What are Whale Heritage Sites?

The Whale Heritage Site (WHS) initiative is the World Cetacean Alliance’s flagship global programme and is currently supported by World Animal Protection. The programme accredits outstanding destinations around the world that support and demonstrate the importance of cetaceans and their habitats.

Whale Heritage Sites (WHSs) showcase an entire community and their relationship with the ocean by:

- Fostering authentic, respectful human-cetacean coexistence.
- Encouraging cultural celebration of cetaceans.
- Supporting local economic and environmental sustainability.
- Developing locally-based science, research and education.

The aim of the WHS programme is to empower communities to preserve cetacean species and their habitats on a global scale, so that they are protected for generations to come.
What are the benefits of Whale Heritage Sites?

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, WHSs 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.

WHSs 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.
Why are Whale Heritage Sites important?

The World Cetacean Alliance (WCA) believes that the development of a network of WHSs, designated against well-developed and robust criteria, can play an important role in recognising unique areas where cetaceans and people exist in harmony.

For the travel industry, WHSs 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.

The WHS certification also provides tourists with an easy way to select responsible whale and dolphin watching destinations; places where people can experience cetaceans in their natural habitat in an authentic and respectful way.

Working towards and maintaining WHS status creates the opportunity for communities to enhance their tradition of whale and dolphin watching and continue to celebrate these magnificent animals through art, education, research and cultural events. The certification also helps communities to distinguish legitimate operators that follow responsible best practices.

World Animal Protection is supporting the WHS programme in the hope that highlighting outstanding destinations for responsible whale and dolphin watching in the wild will reduce demand for tourists to see cetaceans in captivity.
How do Whale Heritage Sites work with other certifications and protected areas?

The WHS programme is designed to support and strengthen the efforts of other certification and conservation initiatives and international site networks, such as Marine Protected Areas and National Parks. For that reason, WCA intends to work with other managing authorities for relevant site processes to ensure that WHSs complement and enhance these.

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), ICAs (Important Cetacean Areas), designated cetacean critical habitats, and/or other schematics relevant to cetaceans and their habitats.
How does the Whale Heritage Site initiative protect cetaceans?

The WHS accreditation process assesses each site to ensure that they’re working to continually improve the welfare of cetaceans and the health of their habitats through responsible and sustainable practices. In this way, WHS certification incentivises each site’s community to engage with their environment in a protective and responsible way, or risk losing their WHS status and associated benefits.

In order to achieve and maintain certification, sites need to meet certain criteria, including being able to demonstrate that they’ve established a responsible framework for managing the coexistence of humans and cetaceans. This framework must include guidelines and regulations to protect cetaceans, as well as a process for implementation and monitoring. Sites are also required to demonstrate their commitment to research, environmental education, and awareness to support conservation efforts.

Before WHS certification is granted, an independent review panel of international experts must be satisfied that the site’s measures will lead to a significant improvement or maintenance of cetacean conservation and welfare. Each WHS may find its own unique means to satisfy the criteria, appropriate to its local context.

For example, in Dana Point, the independent review panel identified plastic pollution as a threat to the local cetacean population and so, within the WHS framework, the steering committee is now developing initiatives that reduce plastic waste making its way into the ocean.

Finally, WHSs are required to show evidence of annual progress against these measures, so that the location-specific conservation benefits are built upon and enhanced year on year. This ensures that the WHS programme not only celebrates those sites that are already doing brilliant things for cetacean conservation but also pushes them to achieve more.
How does the Whale Heritage Site programme ensure that tour operators at each site are responsible?

Respectful human-cetacean coexistence is one of the key criteria for evaluating WHSs. Part of this criteria includes the requirement for all WHSs to demonstrate and continually improve a responsible framework for managing interactions with cetaceans, including the implementation and enforcement of regulations and guidelines.

For example, in Tenerife, through the WHS programme, key stakeholder groups are committed to ensure the reduction of illegal whale watching businesses (which have a negative impact on cetacean welfare through disturbance and harassment) and to encourage tourists and the travel industry to use legal, responsible and sustainable tour operators at the site.

The WCA has developed guidelines for responsible whale and dolphin watching, which tour operators within WHSs are encouraged to follow, and also evaluates whether local legislation is in place as part of the WHS accreditation process.

We are aware that some local companies at WHSs may not fully comply with their commitments, and we encourage our supporters to let us know if they observe any irresponsible practices so that the local WHS steering committee can be informed.
What does being a Whale Heritage Site bring to the community?

WHSs empower and defend the right of local communities to care for and protect whales, dolphins and porpoises through a collaborative management partnership.

Becoming a WHS 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.

WHS status can also 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.
Which locations have been awarded Whale Heritage Site status?

Currently, there are five locations that have achieved WHS status:

1. Hervey Bay, Australia
2. The Bluff, South Africa
3. Tenerife-La Gomera Marine Area, Spain
4. Dana Point, USA
5. Algoa Bay, South Africa

Which locations are Candidate sites for Whale Heritage Site certification?

Currently, the following sites are in the application stage to become accredited WHSs:

1. Cabo Pulmo, Mexico
2. Vancouver Island North, Canada
3. Golfo Dulce, Costa Rica
4. Marlborough Sounds, New Zealand
5. The Azores, Portugal
6. Cabo Polonio, Uruguay
7. Ombar-Wetar Strait, Timor-Leste
8. Santa Barbara Channel, USA
One of the most unique aspects of the WHS programme is that each site is entirely managed by local communities on their own terms. Although each WHS must meet robust criteria, they can only make progress with their application by encouraging collaboration and involvement of stakeholders from across the site.

Sites that want to apply for Whale Heritage Site status must be able to prove that they focus on the following criteria:

- **Encouraging Respectful Human-Cetacean Coexistence**: the WHS has developed, and seeks to continually improve, a responsible framework managing the coexistence of people and cetaceans, most often through the development of responsible whale and dolphin watching tourism.

- **Celebrating Cetaceans**: the WHS celebrates the close cultural association between cetaceans and people. This can be achieved through the arts, crafts, festivals or other celebratory events and more.

- **Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability**: the WHS aims to achieve an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable balance between the natural environment, visitor expectations, and local business and community needs.

- **Research, Education and Awareness**: the WHS recipient has developed, and seeks to continually improve, its commitment towards research, education and awareness.

To become designated as a WHS, a site is required to meet four out of the five sub-criteria of each of the above points, and demonstrate their commitment to work together and address any gaps or issues.

You can find a PDF with details of the certification criteria and criteria guidelines on the Resources page of the WHS website.
Are the rules and requirements the same for all Whale Heritage Sites?

We recognise that the situation will be different in every site regarding the local species, geography, community culture, economics, politics, etc. For this reason, every WHS application is assessed by an independent review panel of international experts, bearing in mind the local context of the site.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to becoming a WHS, as the challenges, opportunities and species-specific needs of each site can vary greatly. Instead, the WHS accreditation process is designed to empower the site’s stakeholders to address the conservation needs of their local cetaceans in the way that will have the greatest impact.

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 WHS – the potential to improve!

The independent review panel assesses this potential 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.
Who can apply for Whale Heritage Site status?

Anyone can apply for WHS status, including NGOs, community groups, tourism associations, government departments, tour operators, individual experts, educational institutes, etc.

The key to success in becoming a WHS is collaboration and stakeholder engagement. If the applicants can prove that their local community supports the WHS application and has the ability to make and enforce decisions that will result in long-term benefits for cetaceans, then they have a greater chance of achieving accreditation.

How can I apply to become a Whale Heritage Site?

You can apply for WHS certification via the application form on the WHS website. Before completing the form, please make sure that you have read all of the relevant information about criteria and pricing.

The Resources page contains information and tools to support WHS applicants, including a list of accreditation criteria, more information about the application process, and copies of the application form in different languages.

If you encounter any problems or have any questions before, during or after the application process, you can always contact us via elizabeth.cuevas@worldcetaceanalliance.org.
What does the Whale Heritage Site application process look like?

One or more stakeholders representing their community apply directly to the WCA for WHS certification. Applicants must complete a five-tiered process to become certified, consisting of:

1. An online initial application questionnaire.
2. A candidacy review, followed by (if successful) designation of Candidate WHS status. Applicants must create a representative steering committee that will represent and facilitate the site moving forward. Candidate WHS status lasts for a maximum of three years before it is either revoked or renewed, or the site applies for full certification.
3. The WCA provides optional technical advice and support on areas for improvement and specific criteria to focus on.
4. A final, detailed application to be assessed by the WHS independent review panel.
5. If successful, WHS certification.

Advice and guidance from the WCA is available for all stages of the certification process. You can find a PDF with details of the process on the Resources page of the WHS website.
What happens after a site has achieved Whale Heritage Site status?

Once a site has been designated as a WHS, it **must show continual improvement** through annual reporting as a measure of excellence and to confirm that the criteria continue to be met and the panel recommendations have been addressed. On-site assessments may take place at any time in the following three years after certification.

In cases where a site receives WHS certification while some of the criteria are not yet met, the steering committee will need to develop an action plan to demonstrate how and when they intend to meet the outstanding criteria.

When a site already meets all of the criteria, they must ensure they continue to fulfil these and, ideally, keep improving over time.
Do sites need to pay for Whale Heritage Site certification?

Yes, there is fee charged annually to WHS status holders. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, we are currently offering Candidate WHS status for free to successful applicants. Fees will only be applied to sites once they become fully certified WHSs.

Certified WHSs pay an annual membership fee of US$3,000 in developed world countries or US$750 in developing world countries.

To assist sites in meeting the cost of certification, the membership fees of WCA Partners and WCA Certified whale watching operators based inside a WHS count towards the annual fee required for WHS certification. This enables organisations, individuals, and businesses to cover the cost of WHS designation and benefit from participating in the WCA, the world’s largest marine conservation partnership – two benefits for the price of one.

An on-site audit fee must be paid once in the first three-year period of certification, and then once every three years afterwards. Audit fees are in addition to the annual certification fee, but can be covered by WCA Partner membership fees within the WHS, if they are sufficient. The WCA will make every effort to ensure this cost is kept to a minimum.
Can members of the public visit a Whale Heritage Site?

Yes, unless the area was already previously closed off to visitors. Areas will not become closed for tourism as a result of receiving WHS certification. On the contrary, we encourage people to visit WHSs, celebrate the beautiful wildlife in these areas, and enjoy the sustainable activities on offer from the local community and businesses.

Are there opportunities for members of the public to support Whale Heritage Sites?

Yes, the idea of WHS is to connect the community and their natural heritage. Therefore, one of the WHS criteria is community involvement – this can be through providing responsible whale watching tours, helping out with festivals, being involved in beach clean-ups or education programmes. Members of the public who are interested in supporting a WHS should contact the steering committee to find out how they can get involved.

If you do not live in a WHS area, you can support the WHS initiative by donating or offering your help to the programme as a volunteer. You can also choose to visit a WHS as the destination for your next holiday and make sure that you support only responsible tour operators and businesses involved in the initiative.