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TRAVEL ADVISORY: CORRESPONDENT'S REPORT; Whale Watching Grows Into a \$1 Billion Industry

By JOHN H. CUSHMAN Jr.

WHILE the debate continues over commercial whaling by a few countries that refuse to follow international agreements prohibiting it, whales are providing the world with another booming industry: boat trips by tourists who have no interest in dining on blubber but just want to see the world's largest mammals.

Whale watching worldwide now accounts for \$1 billion in spending each year by more than nine million people who take part in excursions from almost 90 countries, according to a report published in July by the International Fund for Animal Welfare and written by Erich Hoyt, an author specializing in whale research.

Other studies have found similar results, showing that whale watching is growing steadily. The studies count not just the direct expenditures for boat tickets, but also the spending on lodging, food and the like where trips are offered.

The benefits of whale watching are educational and scientific, as well as economic, according to government and private conservation groups that have studied it, because people who see whales in the wild are likely to support conservation measures.

For that reason, groups like WWF International, the global secretariat of what was formerly called the World Wildlife Fund, which advocates the protection of wildlife, are trying to encourage whale watching, especially in countries that have resumed whaling or have considered doing so. In Norway, which hunts whales and is reopening its trade in whale meat, the group supported the establishment of the Whale Center in Andenes, and it is financing orca studies in the Tysfjord, in which researchers work with the whale watching operators.

In Iceland, which has said it intends to resume whaling, WWF has provided funds for the Whale Center, an interactive museum in Husavik, the country's most popular whale watching town. Tens of thousands go whale watching each year in Iceland, and Cassandra Phillips, the senior policy adviser on whales for WWF International, says that the economic value may already exceed what would be gained if Iceland resumed commercial whaling.

Even in Japan, which has six whaling vessels at sea, more than 100,000 people took whale watching trips in 1998.

Mr. Hoyt's survey, the most comprehensive and most recent, found that whale watching is now offered in 492 communities around the world, nearly 200 more than he found in a 1994 study. The number of those making trips to see whales has been increasing more than 12 percent a year for a decade, he found. The United States, Canada and the Canary Islands, part of Spain, each have more than a million people take such trips annually; Australia and South Africa each should pass the million-person mark soon, he predicted.

Whale watching began to take hold in the mid-1970's in the United States, and is now among New England's notable recreational industries, with annual revenues of \$21 million, according to a study by the Commerce Department. In 1996, the study said, more than 860,000 people took trips around the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary off New England.

In Hawaii, the Commerce Department reported, 52 vessels offered whale watching trips in 1999. Together, they ran an average of 87 trips a day during the whale season, carrying more than 3,000 passengers daily, or nearly 370,000 during the season, December to April. Commercial tour operators collected \$11 million from passengers; the total value of the industry to the local economy was estimated at \$27 million.

Whale watching vessels range from small, rigid-bottomed inflatables used to see orcas in the Pacific Northwest, humpbacks in Hawaii or belugas and blue whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence off the Saguenay River in Quebec, to large boats like the high-speed catamarans that take as many as 200 whale watchers out in New England.

Most people take day trips, but cruise ships visit the feeding humpbacks and orcas in Glacier Bay, Alaska, each summer.

Binoculars and cameras threaten whales less than harpoons do. But the burgeoning of the industry has raised concerns that the whales may be harassed by boats that approach too

fast, come too close or otherwise stress them. In July, a pregnant humpback whale died of injuries apparently suffered when she was struck by a cruise ship in Alaskan waters, conservation officials say. The humpback is an endangered species.

Despite such risks, there are no consistent regulations on whale watching, although in some countries, including the United States, the industry is developing voluntary guidelines to protect the whales.

Mark Spalding, a professor at the University of California at San Diego who has studied and favors whale watching, said at a policy forum on the subject in March: "There is no question there are short-term impacts on whales of whale watching, including behavioral changes, breathing, dives and flight. And until we have proven there is no long-term impact, we should exercise caution."

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