

## Editorial

# Conservation Through Education- Will It Work For Marine Mammals?

*“While there are many advantages for humans in the recreational enjoyment of wildlife,  
I am hard pressed to conceive of any advantages for the wildlife”  
Gauthier (1993)<sup>1</sup>*



I was recently invited as a guest speaker at a workshop held during the Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM) conference in Tampa, Florida. The workshop

brought together individuals and organizations to discuss the numerous educational programs dealing with the conservation of marine mammals and to assess their impacts. Topics included public festivals from Italy and Madagascar, general public programs such as whale watching tours and school/university courses. As a professor at the University of Toronto, I was invited to discuss the numerous undergraduate marine mammal courses that I had initiated at the university with the assistance of the Oceanographic Environmental Research Society (OERS). The impact of these university courses on marine mammal education and conservation on a relatively new population of individuals were organized as a means to help preserve these species. But is there any proof that these different types of educational programs really work?

Ecotourism was the driving force behind educating the public in the early years of human/wildlife interactions. Early studies looked at the effect of educating the public when interacting or coming in close contact with species especially when dealing with wild marine species. Some earlier examples of close public interaction with wild dolphins occurred at Monkey Mia beach or even the hand feeding of wild dolphins at Tangalooma, Moreton Island, both occurring in

Australia. In 1998, Orams and Hill looked at the effect of education on controlling ecotourism in a wild dolphin feeding program (2). They stated that “education has often been used by natural resources management to prompt environmentally responsible behaviour...”. However, they stated that there had been little work done showing how effective education was in reaching this objective. Education at that time was concerned more with creating a strategy to protect wildlife from ecotourism as opposed to using education to conserve wildlife species.

However, by the mid 2000's, educating the ecotourist about conservation had taken a more prominent role during wildlife interactions. Heather Zeppel, in 2008, examined the education and conservation benefits of 18 marine wildlife experiences dealing with dolphins, whales and sea turtles (3). Her conclusions revealed that “marine wildlife interpretive programs that highlight species biology and human impacts influence visitor attitudes, beliefs, and conservation outcomes.” and fostered “...environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviour...” and benefit “...marine conservation.” However, longer evaluation (1-5 years after the experience) was required to examine if the experience of interacting with and being educated about a particular species changed the attitude of the tourists or had direct impact on preserving any species.

Apart from ecotourism, there are many other encounters with marine mammals that offer opportunities to educate the public: zoos/aquariums/theme parks, ‘swimming with’ programs, research



## Editorial Cont'd

facilities, and the numerous movies coming out of Hollywood in recent decades. Even the issue of hunting whales promotes huge amounts of public awareness and education. Some of these encounters are contentious and often evoke strong emotional reactions but they all offer the opportunity to stimulate discussion, exchange ideas, and expand an individual's knowledge base. As well, the success of international/national/local meetings aids in the exchange of valuable scientific knowledge or new ideas and the exponentially increasing numbers of books and scientific papers being published also indicates the strong necessity to publish data that will all help to protect and preserve the various species.

Like many other initiatives that have been pursued in the quest for conserving species of animals or their habitats, education to be a viable tool for the conservation of any species/habitat, requires co-operative efforts from many of the involved individuals or groups. Scientists, politicians, media, local populations, environmental groups and even students from all levels of learning need to be involved in the process of conservation. Willingness and open minds of those involved in this process or effort is all that is required for education to be a truly effective tool in the preservation of a marine mammal species. So easy to put down on paper but much harder to create in reality.

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## References

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3. Zeppel H. Education and conservation benefits of marine wildlife tours: Developing free-choice learning experiences. *The Journal of Environmental Education* 39(3):3-17. 2008.

