



CONVENTION ON MIGRATORY SPECIES

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FOURTH MEETING OF THE SIGNATORIES TO
THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING FOR
THE CONSERVATION OF CETACEANS AND THEIR
HABITATS IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGION

5-6 August 2021, *Online*

ABSTRACT: WHALE WATCHING AND SWIMMING IN THE KINGDOM OF TONGA

Abstract

Humpback Whales visited the Kingdom of Tonga on their seasonal cycle of migration to and from the Antarctica on June to November of every year to mate and calve. For many years of hunting of whales in the Kingdom, a royal proclamation by his late majesty King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV in 1978, banned hunting of the whales, which levelled off the declining number of whales and subsequently promote whales for tourism recreational purposes.

Whales today play a significant role in attracting tourist to Tonga. This industry is growing and has continued to contribute significantly to the country's economy. In 2018, we have recorded tourists total estimated direct expenditure of T\$7.3 million on whale watch tours. It continues to increase in 2019 by 19% to an estimated total of T\$9.1 million. The growth in the whale watching tourism industry has also been reflected in the number of operators. Every year, there is a growing demand for licence from locals. However, for conservation and protecting the wellbeing of the whales, the Ministry is looking at reducing the number of licence through policy decision.

Conserving and protecting the wellbeing of the whales is paramount to the long term sustainability of this industry. There are few conservation measures that the Ministry have put in place to ensure the safety of both whales and tourists, minimize vessels competitions and to avoid the collision of boats if skippers do not behave accordingly to the law. These measures included but not limited to 7 hours only for whale watch activities per day, no whale activities between the hours of 4pm – 5am and issuing of gazette to limit the number of licence for whale activities.

In 2017, the Ministry initiated their first ever enforcements of whale watching activities in Vava'u and had extended to all islands in 2018. Enforcement officers are presented at the wharf to check all whale watch vessels skipper, guide and count number of passengers. The Ministry also build good working relationships in Tonga Police to conduct sea patrol once or twice a week and Ministry of Revenue to check operators tax compliance. It was through the enforcement initiatives that minimizes operator's non-compliance and collecting of estimated total direct expenditure on whale tours.

Two pieces of legislation govern whale watching and swimming in Tonga, firstly The Whale Watching and Swimming Act 2008 and Whale Watching and Swimming Regulation 2013 are the two piece of legislation that governs. The Ministry has the full authority to administer and enforce all aspects of the regulations. However, the Ministry and the operators have identified several issues with the Regulations. The review took place in 2018, it is an ongoing process and is planned to have the new regulations come in to force next year.

The Ministry is very serious about protecting and conserving the whale industry, to ensure its longevity for our future generations.

Teisa Fifita-Tupou (Ministry of Tourism) Principal Tourist Officer

Teisa Fifita-Tupou was born and raised in the Kingdom of Tonga, and is 32 years old. She is currently working for the Ministry of Tourism, as Principal Tourist Officer supervising the work of Industry Empowerment Division, under which the Marine Activities Unit fall. She has been an untiring advocate of achieving best practices in the Kingdom Whale Watching Industry. She initiated the first ever enforcements of Whale Watching Activities in Tonga in 2017 in the Island of Vava'u. From there on, the level of operator's compliance has been increasing significantly over the years. In about 2 years of her time working directly with the Whale Watching and Swimming operators, she identified a few loop holes in the existing legislation that governs the whale watching activities and therefore proposed to review the Regulations. The new Regulations should be complete for next year.

Mrs. Tupou holds a Master degree in Commerce (Tourism Marketing) from the Universtiry of Otago in Dunedin and a Bachelor in Business Studies from Whitireia Community School in Auckland, New Zealand.

