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**Demographics and motivation of participants in commercial swim-with-whale tours in  
Hervey Bay, QLD, Australia**

**Stephanie Stack And Barry MCGovern**



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# Demographics and motivation of participants in commercial swim-with-whale tours in Hervey Bay, QLD, Australia.

## *Report to the IWC Scientific Committee sub-committee on Whale Watching*

Stephanie H. Stack<sup>1,2</sup> and Barry McGovern<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pacific Whale Foundation, Wailuku HI 96793 USA

<sup>2</sup> Pacific Whale Foundation Australia, Urangan QLD 4655 Australia

### *Background*

Swim-with-whales tourism is a growing aspect of whale watching industry. As of 2021, at least 12 countries around the world are offering this form of tourism (Stack and Serra, 2021). Recent research conducted throughout the Pacific has shown that behavioural changes occur when swimmers are present in the water when compared to natural whale behaviour (e.g., Fiori et al. 2019, Hoarau et al., 2020, Sprogis et al. 2020, Stack et al. 2021), and there is concern that an unregulated or poorly regulated industry could be detrimental to the target whale populations. Hervey Bay's regional economy is largely supported by tourism, primarily whale watching. In 2014, swim-with-whale tours were introduced by the state government as a way of supporting economic growth after the whale watching industry stagnated (Stack et al., 2021).

Understanding the participants' motivation for taking part in swim-with-whale tours is an important, but understudied, aspect for effectively managing these interactions. Here, we report on the demographics of swim-with-whale tour participants in Hervey Bay, Queensland and their reported motivations for swimming with humpback whales.

This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 50 swim-with-whale tour participants. Questions were written to assess the following categories: participant motivation, educational value, and support for regulatory action. A set of survey questions were developed using the digital platform Survey Monkey and the order of questions randomized for each participant. The surveys were sent via email to all participants who booked a swim-with-whale tour online during the study period (July 2018-September 2020). Participating in the survey was voluntary and candidates were informed that the survey was for a research study investigating the sustainability of swim-with-whales tourism in Hervey Bay. Responses were anonymous as no individual information was collected.

### *Demographics of swim-with-whale tour participants*

The majority of participants were from Australia (66%), with the USA, the UK, France, Hong Kong, the Netherlands and New Zealand making up the remaining 34% of participants. Of these, 28% were between the ages of 55-64, 14% were over 65 and 10% were under 25. When asked about their experience with whale watching tours, 78% of participants stated they had previously gone on a whale watch tour and of these, 20% reported having gone on 10 or more whale watch trips. When asked if they had participated in a swim-with-whale tour before, 94% said they had not.

### *Measuring participant motivation*

The majority of respondents had participated in whale watching at least once before and were looking for a novel way to experience whales. When asked “Why did you choose to participate in a swim-with-whales tour as opposed to a whale watch tour?” most responses had a theme of novelty. Specific responses were “to have a new type of interaction with whales” (n=12); “to get a closer/more personal interaction with whales” (n=12); “to have an underwater interaction with whales” (n=19). Other reasons included: low cost (n=3), wanting to learn more about whales (n=3), wanting to hear singing underwater (n=1), and wanting to swim with a calf (n=1). Open-ended responses to this question included many variations of “this is a once in a lifetime experience/bucket list item” (n=5) and another theme that emerged was proximity to the whales “I wanted to get even closer to these majestic animals”, “to be next to the animals”, “I wanted to get up close to them with a guide who would know how to act”, “for a closer, immersive experience” (n=10). The final theme to emerge was an emotional connection with the whales, e.g., “it was a very moving experience for me”; “I wanted to see them underwater to feel more connection if possible”; “I wanted to have that swelling feeling of being overtaken by their majestic presence, which I can feel when whale watching. But, to be in the water with them and feeling lost, I think it’s indescribable”. For 64% of participants, taking photos underwater was important during this trip. 56% of them planned to share their photos on social media.

### *Choosing a tour operator*

When selecting a tour operator to book with, choosing an operator that minimizes their impact on the animals was the most commonly used criteria (n=20), with low cost being the second most common factor (n=16). Compliance with the local regulations (n=11) and professional conduct of the company (n=4) were mentioned by some respondents. Practical considerations such as ease of booking, easy access on and off the vessel, convenient departure time, and positive online reviews were all mentioned. Contributing to local research and conservation was important to many people (n=14), although this may not apply broadly to the tourism industry because survey respondents were aware they were participating in a research study at the time of response.

### *The potential impact on wildlife and swimmer safety*

Participants were asked if they considered the potential for impacts on the target whales. 68% of respondents wondered about the impact to the whales and 16% did not give this any consideration. Of the 68% who wondered how this activity may affect the whales, some people offered additional insights. Four people responded “yes, but I trusted the tour company to do the right thing”, one person responded “yes, but I did it anyway because the whales could leave if they wanted to”, and one person answered “yes, but I trusted the rules in place were adequate to protect the whales”. When answering this question, one participant mentioned specific concerns about the impact to whales “My partner has always really loved whales and I thought that it would be a really cool experience for him that was different to what he had done before. However, I was unsure of how ethical it was (and would not choose to do it if it was harmful to whales) and so thought participating in the research study would be a good idea”.

Participants were asked about their perception of the risk to the swimmers entering the water prior to the tour taking place. The question “Before booking the tour, did you consider this might be a dangerous activity for you to participate in?” was answered by 58% of participants (n=29) assumed there to be no risk, or minimal risk, to swimming with whales. There were 14 people who said they were aware that a whale could hurt people, but they were willing to accept that risk, and there were 4 respondents who stated their main concern was sharks.

These same participants were asked about their perception of the risk to the swimmer's safety after the tour had ended. The question was posed “*While in the water did you ever feel unsafe?*” and all passengers reported they felt safe, or that they were worried about things other than the whales themselves (e.g., sharks, weather, swimming ability). Stack et al. (2021) documented humpback whale behavior during the same tours that these passenger surveys were collected from, and reported on three instances where whale behaviour posed a risk to swimmer safety; suggesting that the participants may not be clearly able to identify safety risks stemming from whale behaviour.

#### *Measuring support for regulatory measures*

Participants were asked “if swim-with-whale tours were proven to have negative impacts on whales, what would you do?” The majority of people answered that they would support stronger management measures, such as a ban on swim-with-whale tours (n=30), or additional guidelines to minimize impact to whales (n=28). Only one participant said they would not change anything.

#### *Conclusions*

This information can inform the implementation of revised management measures for this industry. Our results demonstrate that people had a broad range of motivations for choosing to participate in a swim-with-whales tour in Hervey Bay, Australia. We suggest that stricter guidelines would not negatively affect the economics of this industry, as most passengers choose tour operators who take steps to minimize their impact on the animals, showed concern for animal welfare, and indicated they would support regulatory action should this activity negatively impact the whales.

Our results also demonstrate that passengers are largely unaware of the potential risks to their safety involved in swimming with whales. This is concerning as the industry continues to grow worldwide. There has been an increase in unlicensed swim-with operations in Australia, including tours being offered in commonwealth waters where they are outside the jurisdiction of any government regulation (personal observation). We suggest that better national management of whale-based tourism by the government of Australia is needed, including educational messaging and enforcement campaigns.

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