

SUSTAINABLE WHALE AND DOLPHIN WATCHING TOURISM NETWORK



Greetings from Ambassador Brunet

Dear network partners,

Allow me to thank Australia for transmitting to France the secretariat of our network shortly after our membership in IORA; it is a mark of trust and a big responsibility.

I would like to underline the opportunity that this new responsibility represents for France and for our overseas centers of expertise, and first of all for the CEDTM based in Reunion, whose work and commitment I would like to commend.

Be assured of our desire to promote the fluidity of exchanges within the network through the newsletter, and also through concrete actions. We will organize in particular thematic video conferences, with the aim of hosting a network meeting on our soil at a later stage.

The idea of this network is to strengthen exchanges between countries and the sharing of experience. The exceptional year that we are currently recording and the very large number of whales coming to our coasts (with the associated tourism), only reinforces the interest in moving the subject forward by reconciling responsible tourism and the tranquility and protection of cetaceans.



We must also place ourselves in the perspective of the United Nations Conference on the Oceans which will take place in Nice in June 2025. Organized with Costa Rica, this conference will aim to raise the level of collective ambition for the protection of the oceans.

Jean-Claude Brunet,
Ambassador, Delegate for Regional Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Zone

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IORA's Whale and Dolphin Watching Network: Sustaining the Indian Ocean's Treasures

Whale and dolphin watching tourism offers an exciting adventure for tourists and plays a pivotal role in bolstering local and national economies. However, this thriving industry has long grappled with a significant issue - the lack of robust regulatory frameworks or guidelines to encourage operators to adopt a respectful practice towards cetaceans

It's worth noting that in many countries, progress is underway to address this concern, which represents a positive development. Nevertheless, the uncontrolled growth of this sector has raised valid concerns regarding its potential disruptions to cetacean populations.

To address these challenges and support the sustainable growth of this industry, the governments of Australia and Sri Lanka, in collaboration with the International Whaling Commission Secretariat, the Sri Lankan Institute of Policy Studies, Murdoch University's Cetacean Research Unit, and the IORA Secretariat, jointly hosted a workshop in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in February 2016, entitled 'Building Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism in the Indian Ocean Region.'

The workshop brought together governmental policymakers and scientists to facilitate the exchange of experiences in managing whale and dolphin watching tourism among IORA Member States and to provide access to international expertise in whale and dolphin watching.

Recognizing the importance of such a forum for sustainable whale and dolphin watching in the Indian Ocean region, the idea of creating a dedicated network for the region gained widespread support at the workshop.

In October 2017, during the IORA Working Group on Trade and Investment meeting, an agreement was reached that the IORA Secretariat would take the lead in developing this much-needed network.



The Network's Purpose

The primary aim of the IORA Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism Network is to foster regional cooperation in the area of sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism.

It seeks to do this by facilitating the sharing of information, promoting capacity building, and providing access to expertise. The overarching goal is to ensure the industry's economic, social, and environmental sustainability within the Indian Ocean region.

The newsletter serves as a tool for achieving this objective playing a role in developing and sharing information as a collective resource. It fulfills multiple functions, including sharing success stories and information about initiatives supporting sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism, disseminating new research and scientific insights to advance industry knowledge, and promoting partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders for the betterment of the sector.

In a region where the industry holds tremendous potential, the IORA Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism Network, along with its newsletter, is paving the way for a more well-governed, sustainable, and responsible future. Together, we can ensure that our interactions with these incredible marine creatures remain a source of wonder and inspiration, all while promoting responsible tourism and the protection of cetaceans.



WE VALUE YOUR OPINION!

or click **on the link** to share your expectations and ideas with us

Scan this QR code



IWC: supplying the tools for sustainable whale watching

The International Whaling Commission is the intergovernmental organisation with responsibility for regulation of whaling and conservation of whales. These tasks have changed considerably since the Commission was established in 1946.

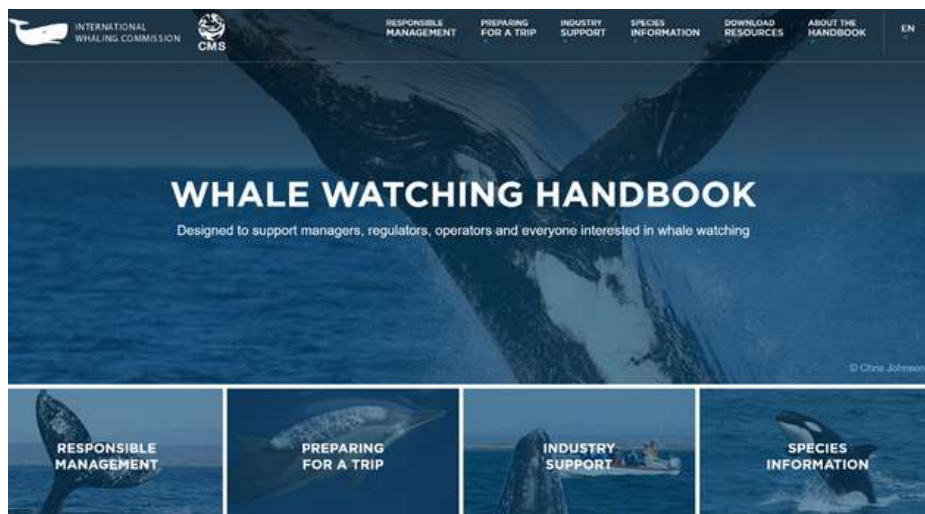


A moratorium on commercial whaling has been in place for over 35 years. The threats facing whales have changed enormously and the IWC has evolved in order to tackle them. Today's work programmes address concerns including bycatch, ship collisions, pollution from noise, plastic and chemicals, and climate change. The Commission's priority activities are scientific research, information sharing and capacity building. The IWC is active in the IORA region and on a variety of topics, from stranding and entanglement response workshops in Oman and Kenya, to scientific research projects focused on small cetaceans in Indonesia and Malaysia.



The IWC was pleased to join IORA and other organisations at a workshop on sustainable whale watching, held in Sri Lanka in 2016. The workshop was attended by policy makers, regulators, scientists, and representatives from both the whale watching and wider tourism industries. All participants shared the aims of increasing access to expertise, education and capacity building in order to set a gold standard for sustainable whale watching. Since that workshop, the IWC has introduced new tools specifically aimed at helping regulators, operators and educators achieve this gold standard.

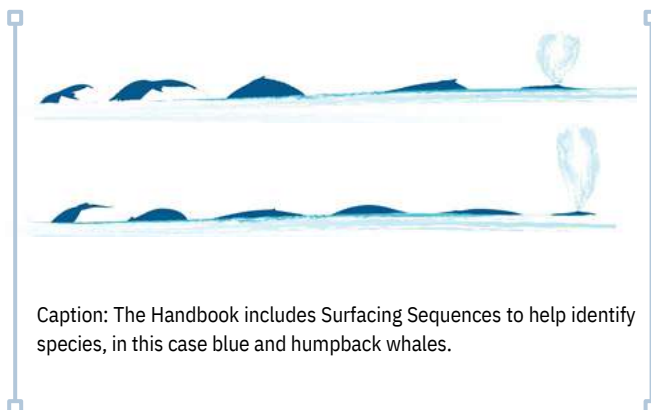
The Whale Watching Handbook



The Handbook is a collaboration with the Convention for Migratory Species and was launched in 2018. It is a living, online tool which includes an interactive world whale watching map, a compendium of national and regional regulations, case studies, resources for onboard education and a searchable database of scientific literature. More material is added each year but it currently contains over 550 reports and articles, 70 sets of regulations and more than 20 individual case studies.

IORA Member States are encouraged to contribute case studies and country profiles to the IWC Whale Watching Handbook by emailing secretariat@iwc.int. The Handbook is available in English, French and Spanish and can be accessed on the IWC's webpage: <https://wwhandbook.iwc.int/en/>

Separate sections are tailored to the needs of different groups: managers and regulators, the whale watching industry, and the general public. Regulators can read about management strategies and stakeholder engagement whilst operators learn how to offer the best experience, work with the local community and contribute to scientific research. Members of the public preparing for a whale watching trip can equip themselves with questions to ask when choosing a trip and download illustrations and surfacing sequences to help them identify animals in the water.



Caption: The Handbook includes Surfacing Sequences to help identify species, in this case blue and humpback whales.

General Principles for Whale Watching

First produced in 1996, the latest version of the short document General Principles for Whale Watching was published in 2022. The Principles incorporate advice from leading scientists, conservationists and policy makers and summarises the recommended steps that should be taken to avoid adverse impacts on whales from whale watching operations.

Spotlight on the Indian Ocean

Six IORA member countries are already featured in the Whale Watching Handbook and the IWC is keen to include more information from this region. If you would like to submit material or discuss options please contact secretariat@iwc.int

The Handbook is currently available in English, French and Spanish. Limited resources mean it is not possible to produce other versions at the moment but as part of ongoing efforts to raise awareness of these resources and include more information from Africa and Asia, summary information is being translated into other languages including Indonesian and Malay, Indian and Arabic. These translations will be posted [here](#) when they are available. The IWC is actively seeking your feedback on how best to raise awareness of the Handbook and other IWC resources so please use the email address above if you have any suggestions or requests.

Exploring the Behavioural Impact of Australia's "Swim-with-Whale" Tourism



Stephanie Stack is the Chief Research Biologist at the Pacific Whale Foundation and is completing her PhD at Griffith University, studying humpback whale migration dynamics in a changing climate.

Her research focuses on quantifying the impact of human activities on cetacean health and behaviour and working with stakeholders to develop appropriate mitigation strategies. To find out more about her work, visit pacificwhale.org/research

The popularity of "swim-with-whale" tourism is on the rise in Australia, offering people the chance to fulfil their dreams of getting up close and personal with humpback whales. However, there is a lack of research and oversight to ensure that these tours do not negatively affect the whales' behaviour. Unlike boat-based whale watching, which is well-studied and regulated, there is limited information on the short and long-term impacts of commercial swim-with-whale tours.

Humpback whales in East Australia often gather in sheltered coastal areas, like Hervey Bay, during their annual migration for rest and energy conservation. The proximity to the coastline exposes these whales to increased human activities, potentially disrupting their natural behaviours like resting, nursing calves, and migrating. Previous research has shown that human disturbance can alter the behaviour and activity patterns of cetaceans.

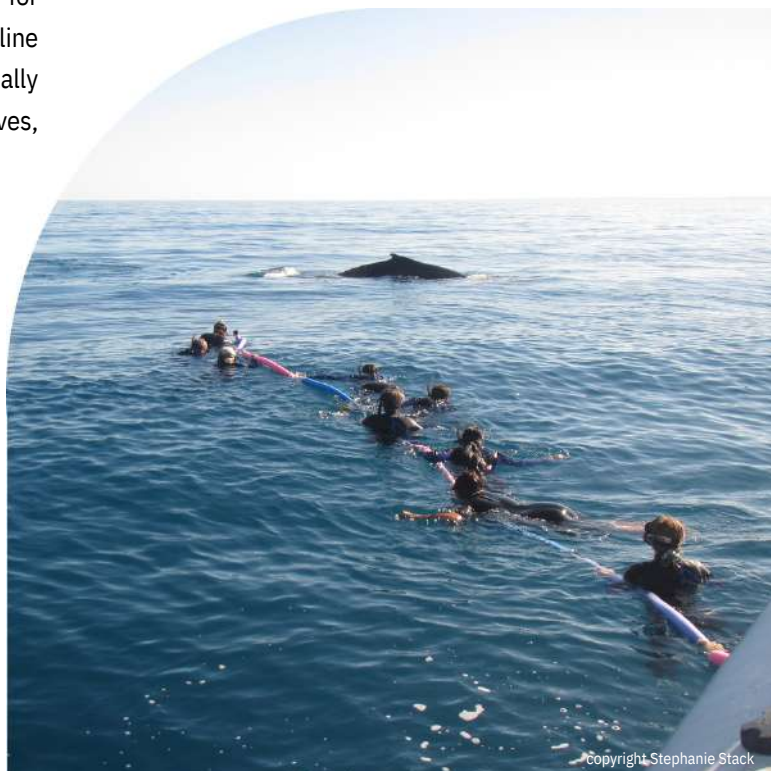
Stephanie and her colleagues conducted a research project in Hervey Bay, Queensland, to investigate differences in humpback whale behaviour during whale-watch tours and swim-with-whale tours. They collected data over three years to compare natural behaviours to those exhibited during tourism exposure and measured the duration of any behavioural changes.

The study, published in the scientific journal *Frontiers in Marine Science*, revealed significant differences in humpback whale behaviour during swim-with-whale tours compared to whale-watch tours.

Notably, there was a 50% reduction in resting time when swimmers were in the water, as opposed to when a whale-watching boat was nearby. Additionally, the study emphasized the importance of maintaining a safe distance from the whales to prevent disturbance, regardless of the tour type.

While individual disturbances to whale behaviour might seem insignificant, repeated disruptions can accumulate over the course of their migration, potentially impacting their energy reserves. Humpback whales are capital breeders with limited energy stores, making it crucial to reduce disturbances to support their population recovery and sustain the marine tourism industry.

In countries like Australia, where swim-with-whale tourism is established, robust education and enforcement programs are needed, coupled with ongoing scientific research to monitor population dynamics. This approach is vital to minimise impacts on the whale population and guide adaptive management strategies. In conclusion, although swim-with-whale tourism may provide an enticing and exhilarating opportunity, it remains crucial to consider the delicate equilibrium between human enjoyment and the protection of these magnificent creatures.



Copyright Stephanie Stack

A team dedicated to promoting a sustainable whale-watching in Reunion Island



Whale-watching began on Reunion Island in the early 2000s and has rapidly developed especially since 2017, due to consecutive record-breaking sightings of humpback whales during the austral winter breeding season and a high demand for cetacean interactions. The activity is now well established, featuring year-round tours in also targeting three species of resident coastal dolphin species.

“Quietude” team was created in 2017 and is part of the NGO « Sea turtle study and discovery center » (CEDTM). The team raises awareness among responsible whale-watching practices, monitors the activity and supports a sustainable development of the industry.

Therefore, the three “Quietude” agents patrol Reunion's coastal waters throughout the year, especially during the humpback whale season, targeting whale-watching areas to inform sea users of the regulations governing the respectful approach and observation of cetaceans. It also facilitates communication between users by acting as a mediator between the parties involved. They additionally monitor the evolution of the activity and its impact on cetaceans by collecting data during excursions. They produce a yearly scientific report and timely supplementary studies and publications.

On land, the team acts as an intermediary between stakeholders, offering support to those who seek to exceed compliance with current legislations by promoting soft law instruments.

Training and educational resources have been created and are conveniently accessible through quietude-cetaces.org. For instance, the OMEGA training program provides a lively and engaging 30-minute course that individuals can review before embarking on their sea excursion (formation-omega.re).



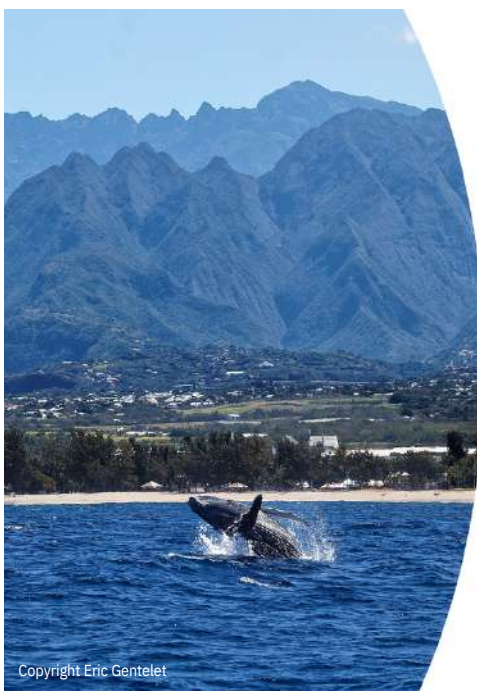
Having a dedicated team on a whale-watching territory offers a wide range of advantages. The regular presence of non-sworn agents at sea, facilitating communication, generates a sense of belonging to a community and the ability to have a neutral facilitator to report accurate situations in the field to the authorities. It also allows new potential threats to the animals and to the safety of whale watchers to be reported more quickly. Moreover, it provides an overview of the challenges that each stakeholder faces in their practice and an opportunity to advise on appropriate regulatory tools.

However, whale-watching is a nature-based tourism activity facing various contexts, rapid and seasonal evolutions, and a significant and growing demand, raising socio-economic and environmental issues. Pressure and impacts on the animals have been widely reported by several scientific studies worldwide and should be considered at every stage of the reflection for a sustainable activity. The strength of a dedicated on-field team is also in improving the knowledge on interactions and threats and in promoting a protection of the animals and the user's safety as daily priorities



From monitoring the annual presence of humpback whales in Reunion Island to assessing wider connectivity between African sub-stocks

The humpback whale season broke all the records in Reunion Island this year, with the highest level of humpback whale occurrence ever recorded in the territorial waters of this breeding area. **Globice Reunion, the scientific NGO in charge of the annual monitoring of this migratory species in La Réunion, has identified no fewer than 700 distinct individuals at mid-season (compared with 430 over the entire 2022 season, which was already a record). The final figures will be known at the end of the year, but already look to be historic.**

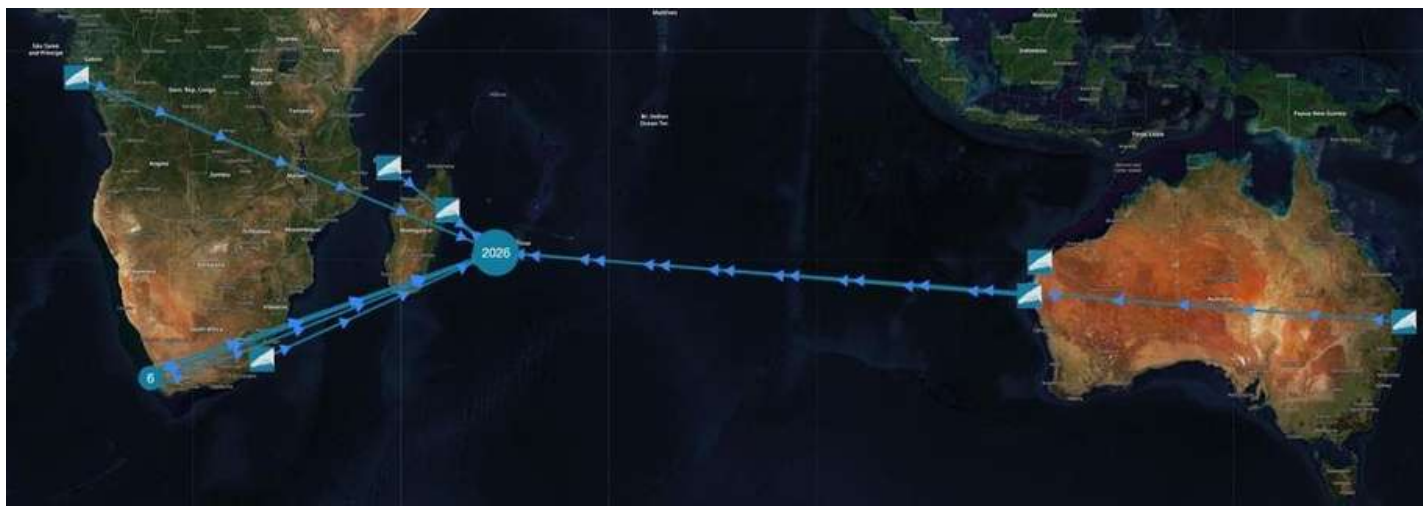


This assessment is based on the photo-identification of each humpback whale tail fluke (which are the individual markers of these animals) and involves a huge amount of data processing and photo matching.

To facilitate this work, Globice Reunion initiated several months ago, as part of the IndoCet research consortium, a collaboration with Happywhale who has developed artificial intelligence tools for automate matching. The Happywhale tool includes advanced image processing algorithms allowing to match whale photos with scientific collections and is a reliable tool that scientists, and eco tourists alike, can use to match whale flukes to help determine the movements of humpback whales.

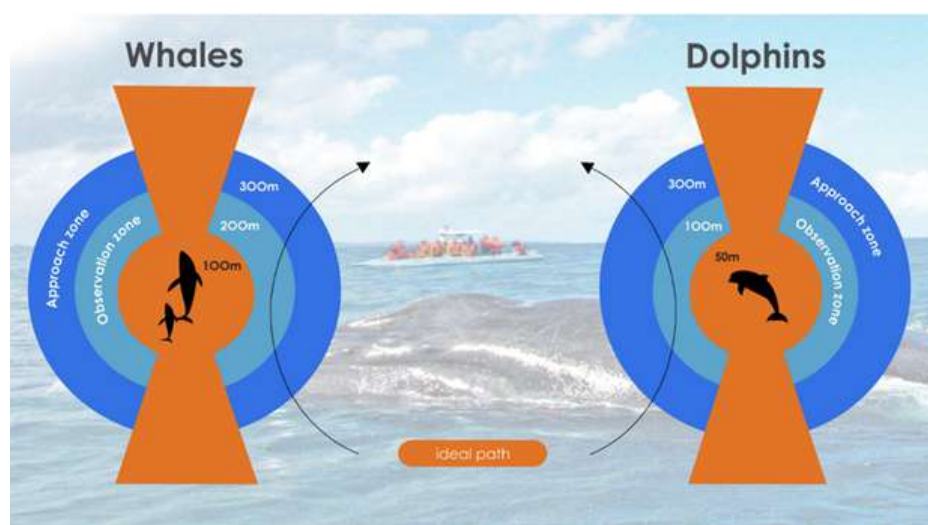
Thanks to the success of this first collaboration and given the efficiency of the IA tool and the effective outreach of HappyWhale, IndoCet and HappyWhale have decided to establish an advanced partnership with the general objective of conducting a regional assessment of connectivity between the south-western Indian Ocean sub-stocks and more broadly with other breeding stocks of the southern hemisphere (particularly West African, Brazil and Australian stocks and substocks). Ultimately, the data would be used to produce estimates of population abundance and exchange rates, which will be relevant to the next IWC Southern hemisphere humpback whale in-depth assessment.

To date, several researchers, conservation organizations and citizen science networks from the region have been submitting their fluke images to HappyWhale. The resulting matches are already stunning, with multiple recaptures found between sub-stocks (Reunion-South-Africa, Tanzania-South Africa, Tanzania-Madagascar and Kenya-Madagascar) and some long-distance recaptures among ocean basins: between Reunion and eastern and western Australia, from Globice's data; between Kenya and eastern Australia; between Tanzania and Columbia, and between South Arica and Brazil).



ECOTOURISM : Madagascar leads marine megafauna responsible observation in the Indian Ocean

Humpback whales, ambassadors of the oceans, migrate every year from Antarctica to their birthplace in warm tropical waters. The arrival of these giants of the seas along Madagascar's coast is eagerly awaited by all those involved in conservation and tourism on the island. Madagascar has an interministerial decree n°2083/2000 of March 08, 2000, which regulates whale and dolphin watching in their natural environment, and which is embodied in a whale-watching charter respected by tourist operators.



Approach regulations in Madagascar

To learn more about Cetamada's work, visit their page: <https://www.cetamada.org>

On the other way, the ecovolunteering program set up by Cetamada during the humpback whale migration season enables scientific data to be collected on tourist boats. In addition to leading and supervising those outings, the ecovolunteers also contribute to citizen science by collecting scientific data at sea. Eleven ecovolunteers, mainly students from America, France, the UK and Madagascar, joined us during the 2023 whale season. Thanks to the involvement of these young volunteers, more than 500 photos of caudal fins and around twenty genetic samples (squames: fragments of skin left by the whale after a jump) have been collected. The data collected from different migration zones (Sainte Marie, Majunga and Tuléar) will be integrated into our photo-identification and genetic database. Our warmest thanks to our 2023 ecovolunteers for their passion and enthusiasm.



Specialized guides training in Nosy Be & Sainte Marie



The Southern African Humpback whale migration route festivals



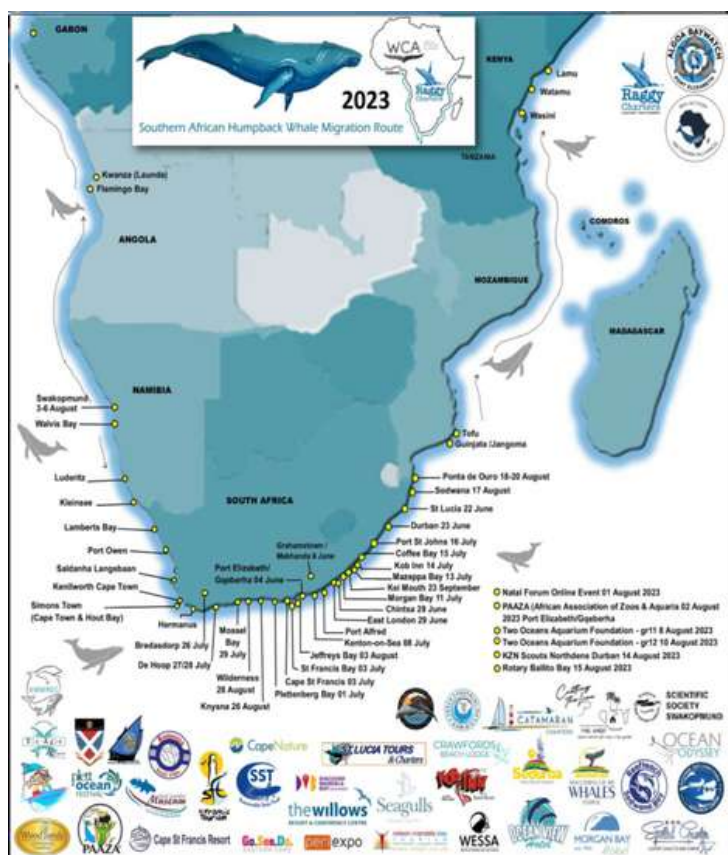
**Dr Deborah
Robertson-Andersson**

Speakers along the route are hosted by interested organizations and give presentations which are multifaceted and aimed at achieving several key objectives such as education and awareness, promoting the conservation of humpback whales and their critical habitats. These talks play a vital role in informing coastal communities, residents, and visitors about the significance of humpback whales and the challenges they face. Some organizations have grown the talks into local festivals and events which serve as platforms for celebrating the whales' arrival and emphasizing the importance of their preservation by becoming whale heritage sites.

The talks demystify the latest scientific research and translate it so that the public's understanding of humpback whales' behaviours, and the ever-changing dynamics of their migration is deepened. Coastal communities are actively engaged in conservation efforts, participating in beach clean-ups, supporting whale disentanglement initiatives and responsible whale-watching practices.

Expanding the route to include more communities and organizations is an ongoing objective. By creating a network of celebrations, the route fosters a sense of collective responsibility and pride in the welfare of these iconic creatures. Additionally, the route raises public awareness about the challenges faced by humpback whales, seeking funding and support for research, conservation, and educational initiatives. This year the route was sponsored by Bay Action Network Alliance, Chrysalis Training and Skills Development and Raggy Charters.

The Southern African Humpback Whale Migration Route (SAHWMR) is a remarkable celebration of marine heritage and conservation and extends along the coastline of southern Africa from Lamu, Kenya in the east to Libreville, Angola in the West. This human migration route encapsulates the annual journey of humpback whales as they travel through the region's coastal waters. The route has been active since 2018 and in 2023 30 talks were given by Dr Deborah Robertson-Andersson who stated that she has spent a lifetime learning how to communicate science. As the Humpback whales embark on a remarkable odyssey that encompasses both the eastern and western shores of the continent, the SAHWMR route follows these magnificent creatures, offering members of the public a glimpse into their incredible journey and the perils that they have faced both in the past and present.



Deborah talked to as many people as possible about this great Whale Migration.

Some 2023 stats

Talks:	33
Festivals:	5
Kilometres travelled:	11987
Hours spent driving:	169
Youngest:	9 months
Oldest:	87
People reached:	~ 1760
Festival goers:	12100

The talks' themes adapt to emerging threats, such as climate change, plastic pollution, entanglements, and ship strikes, through research and mitigation efforts. Collaboration with international initiatives and organizations, such as the World Cetacean Alliance, enhances the collective impact of conservation measures. The ultimate goal is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Southern African Humpback Whale Migration Route, instilling a sense of pride and responsibility within coastal communities to ensure that these celebrations continue for generations to come. This extraordinary journey along the Southern African coastline reflects a commitment to the well-being of humpback whales and their precious habitats, uniting people in the shared mission of conservation through education, passion, and determination.

Want to learn more about Deborah's adventures? Visit the website : <https://www.raggycharters.co.za/page/southern-hemisphere-humpback-whale-migration-route-shhwmr>



Lloyd Edwards runs the oldest privately funded marine conservation project in Africa that he founded in 1992. For the last 26 years he has been running sustainable marine eco cruises with his company Raggy Charters. Funds generated from these cruises are used to fund marine conservation projects.

Discover Lloyd's responsible whale watching company on this website : <https://www.raggycharters.co.za>



First sighting of an Albino Bottlenose Dolphin in Africa: Lloyd's account!

After 31 years of marine cruises in Algoa Bay . . . I thought I had seen it all. What a mistake that turned out to be! It was a very special day as we were celebrating my son Kalahari's wedding. I was on the crow's nest when we approached Lover's Lane, the favourite hangout for the world's biggest Indo-Pacific Bottlenose dolphin population of 28 500 in Algoa Bay. All of a sudden, I saw a white flash in the water among a pod of around 200 dolphins. When I saw it again, there it was, a beautiful metre long albino calf of around a month old.

Albinism is a genetic anomaly that causes the total or partial absence of melanin in an animal or plant. It occurs when cells that normally make the pigment melanin, responsible for skin, hair and eye colour, fail to produce it at normal levels or at all.



True albinism is so rare that only a few individuals have been observed since the 1950's and never in Africa. As albinos usually stand out from the rest of the school, it makes them an easy meal for predatory sharks. Unfortunately, they attract also human attention and has led to them being captured for display in aquariums. This one was always swimming in the middle of the school, being protected by its mother and the rest of the adults. Our last sighting of who is now called "Popcorn" was on the 25th October 2023, making those 6 months and 21 days since the initial sighting!



Albinism is a result of a genetic mutation in several genes which makes total albinism extremely rare. It is a recessive trait and will only manifest itself if the mutated genes were received from both parents. Depending on which genes are affected will determine which parts of their bodies are white. These animals exhibit partial albinism, whereas when the entire body is white and the eyes are affected, it is called "true" albinism. The eyes look pink as the blood vessels can be seen in the back of the eye through the transparent iris.



We welcome all contributions or ideas for future issues. Please send feedback or content to whaledolphinwatching.network@gmail.com