Introduction to Environmental Anthropology
Environmental Studies Certificate Program - LMU

# A personal reflection on my participation in ecotourism and whale-watching activities: to what extent am I part of the problem?

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**Abstract**

This essay is a personal exploration of the ecotourism and whale-watching industry in a small fishing village on Ecuador's Pacific coast. Ecotourism has been advertised as a panacea and a simple solution to exploitative mass tourism enterprises, while at the same time providing a sense of adventure and escape from reality for the middle class. However, the ecotourism industry is full of contradictions as it is a capitalist solution aimed at resolving a problem caused by a capitalist model. Whale-watching has been strongly promoted as a sustainable solution to whaling. Countries in the Global South, such as Ecuador, have adopted conservation policies for the protection of these animals under the successful influence of local and international NGOs. I explore whether these policies have achieved their goal of sustainable development and whether the whale-watching industry in a fishing village fulfills the claims promoted under ecotourism.

**Keywords:** cetaceans, ecotourism, whale-watching, Ecuador, sustainable development

Cetaceans, a group which includes whales, dolphins, and porpoises, have gained great attention as charismatic animals. I, personally, have often felt they are majestic and mystical creatures of the sea. Members of this group vary greatly in size, from small dolphins to extremely large blue whales—the blue whale being the largest animal on the planet. Being relatively intelligent and possessing complex social and communication systems, these creatures have caught our human attention. Another aspect in their favor is their mystical underwater worlds: unbeknownst to us there is an entire system of which we know only very little. Whales, dolphins, and porpoises come to the surface to breath, play, clean their skin, and then dive back into the deep dark waters to which very few have access; for example, sperm whales are capable of diving up to 2km in search for food. Moreover, having returned to the water from land, cetaceans also present extreme and particular specializations that are intriguing to biologists, as well as to the general public. It is difficult not to be captured by the meaning we, as well as extensive anti-whaling campaigns, have attached to them.

Observing whales in the wild has always been an exciting idea since I became a biologist, if not earlier. In April 2018, I was gifted a whale watching tour. We boarded a large boat, and there must have been at least 200 other people with us, all excitedly trying to find the best place in case we spotted our target: a grey whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*). These animals are a common tourist attraction on the west coast of the United States as they migrate from Alaska, where they spend their summers, to their breeding grounds in Mexico. We spent approximately two hours navigating the Californian coast of the Pacific Ocean, some of us more attentively on the lookout for a spot on the surface of the water than others. In the meantime, we encountered a

pod of dolphins that swam right in front of our boat; however, as an ornithologist enthusiast, I must admit that I was more interested in seeing the brown pelican fishing next to it. Regardless of the intervening personal distractions, our boat did not spot a grey whale. I left the boat sad and unfulfilled; I had been promised the sight of a magnificent creature in its wild habitat and all I got was a common pod of dolphins. At the exit we were given a discount voucher in case we wanted to try again.

My second encounter with whale-watching ecotourism was in Ecuador. Six months after my first failed attempt at observing a whale in the wild, I was back in my home country determined to try again and, hopefully, watch a humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) breaching like I had seen before in videos from National Geographic and advertisement photos. Humpback whales breed off the coasts of Ecuador as they migrate north from the Antarctic peninsula, concentrating in large numbers. They have become a symbol of the fishing village from where one embarks for whale-watching trips. As we walked from the local ecotourism agency to the harbor, our tour guide started communicating via shouts with another guide across the street. This was not supposed to be his shift, informed him the other guide. Thus, they switched, and we continued walking in our group to the harbor. Non-Spanish speaking tourists looked confused at the change but seemed to not care when we reached long pier that lead us to our boat. Before we were allowed on the boat, our guide gave us a few safety instructions and a breakdown of the itinerary for the day.

Our trip also included a visit to Isla de La Plata, a small uninhabited island that is part of Machalilla National Park. This island is often called "the other Galapagos of Ecuador" because one can see some of the species that are otherwise unique to the Galapagos Islands: blue-footed boobies' nests with chicks (*Sula nebouxii*),[1] magnificent frigate males proudly displaying their red throat pouches (*Fregata magnificens*),[2] giant rays (*Manta birostris*),[3] multiple sea turtle species, among other marine species. The sky was cloudy, the ocean a little rough, and there were no whales in sight throughout the 40km stretch to Isla de La Plata. Our guides did not do a great job at keeping our hopes up, one of them mentioning only once: "We will likely see them on the way back." After our hike in Isla de La Plata, we got back on our boat, I had my binoculars readily at hand—every time I saw a wave break, I would look to see whether it was a whale breaching instead. The bland words of our guide became true, the first sighting of a humpback whale was mild, no breaching, but an adult individually casually swimming. Everyone got a picture or video of the tail about to disappear in the water, a flipper pointing out of the water, a dorsal fin shyly showing about the surface, two snouts popping vertically out of the water.[4] Finally, we arrived back at the harbor happily and satisfied, the ten people in our tiny boat arrived exhausted and rejuvenated, and their cameras filled with pictures and videos[5].

For a long time, I had thought uncritically about the ecotourism industry. I have believed that, at least for Ecuador, it is a positive asset for conservation purposes and

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[1] Blue-footed boobies - Nat Geo
[2] Magnificent frigatebird - Nat Geo
[3] Giant ray - NOAA
[4] See attached video #1
[5] Like this one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixILnVJhVN4

community empowerment; however, I am aware that there is more beyond this panacea. In this essay, I aim to discover my own cultural, intellectual, and perceptual biases towards the ecotourism industry. I aim to rediscover ecotourism by exploring aspects from which I have consciously looked the other way in search of my own personal fulfillment. This essay aims to be a personal reflection of my action and how I may learn to act better. Being a biologist and seeing animals in the wild, despite the negative implications it may have, brings me happiness. I have hiked and camped in national parks in the United States, I have conducted field research in Ecuador's deep jungle while at the same time done tourist hikes and canoe trips to observe even more wild animals; I have participated in ornithology bird-watching days, and I have gone on safari in Tanzania and South Africa. I believe it is time to analyze my actions and the consequences of my participation in these activities.

In order to achieve this, I have conducted literary research on the topic of ecotourism, and more particularly whale-watching ecotourism. I have focused on its impacts in Ecuador and its communities because that is where I feel more connected, and my actions more immediate. This is an experiment, so bear with me.

**Ecotourism**

The origin of ecotourism itself seems to be dubious. Fennell dates its first uses back to the 1970s and 1980s.[6] Although it is difficult to point to an exact time and person, Fennell

[6] David A. Fennell, *Ecotourism*, 3. ed (London: Routledge, 2008).

mentions that it is likely that multiple people and enterprises convergently arrived at its use. More importantly, ecotourism can be described as a balance between tourism development and resource protection. The International Ecotourism Society characterizes ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education."[7] Moreover, Powell and Ham similarly define ecotourism as "tourism to natural areas that supports environmental conservation, social equity and environmental education in an effort to maintain economic viability without degrading the host environment."[8] Although these two definitions are very close in similarity, I will use Powell and Ham's definition as it describes the economic and social aspects in more detail as it pertains to ecotourism. Further, ecotourism has become an important branch of the tourism industry. In 2009, it generated $77 billion in revenue, was approximately 5-7% of the travel and tourism industries, and was also the fastest growing sector of the travel industry, with an annual growth rate of 10-30%.[9] Under these definitions and income statistics, ecotourism is promoted as "a sustainable development strategy for areas that have not experienced significant benefits from conventional development measures"[10].

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[7] "What Is Ecotourism," *The International Ecotourism Society* (blog), accessed March 28, 2020, https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/.

[8] Robert B. Powell and S. H. Ham, "Can Ecotourism Interpretation Really Lead to Pro-Conservation Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviour? Evidence from the Galapagos Islands," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 16, no. 4 (July 7, 2008): 467–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580802154223.

[9] "Ecotourism" (EBSCO Sustainability Watch, 2009), https://ebscosustainability.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/ecotourism.pdf.

[10] Robert Fletcher and Katja Neves, "Contradictions in Tourism: The Promise and Pitfalls of Ecotourism as a Manifold Capitalist Fix," *Environment and Society* 3, no. 1 (September 1, 2012): 60–77, https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2012.030105.

If we take into consideration the definition of ecotourism and its revenue numbers separately, it becomes difficult to connect the inherent contradictions within its capitalist working framework. However, if we analyze these closely, it prompts us to wonder whether the industry that has been so widely advertised as a positive and sustainable alternative to mass tourism is truly better. Powell and Ham make it clear that all aspects of their definition are interconnected and are interdependent on one another for the successful operation of ecotourism.[11] Hence, sustainability of ecotourism depends on stakeholders recognizing the interdependence between factors such as environmental conservation, equity, education, and economic benefits.

Economic benefits cannot be maintained without ensuring that the income sources, in this case the natural ecosystem and the proper conservation of the animals, is well maintained and conserved so that it can continue to be used for ecotourism purposes—without a pristine environment, there is no industry. Theoretically, the same case applies to a socially equitable environment and educational aspects of the communities that live in the area, as well as of the visitors. Importantly, these cannot be a maintained without economic benefits. Profits are necessary so they can be invested in these factors. Hence one might conclude that conservation, education, and social equity for these communities and environments are not valuable unless they can produce profit. That is, that there is no inherent value in this breathing ecosystem if it does not produce profits.

[11] Powell and Ham, "Can Ecotourism Interpretation Really Lead to Pro-Conservation Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviour?"

My thought process then takes me to other aspects of running a capitalist business model for conservation, social equity, and education. Firstly, can there be social equity under a capitalist business model, where often the creation and increase in capital is based on the exploitation of human labor? Should ecotourism be run as not-for-profit model where the revenue from visitors is fully reinvested in social, conservational, and education programs for the communities involved? Powell and Ham mention that "a tranquil stable, equitable social environment" is necessary for the for-profit aspect of ecotourism[12]. However, research has indicated that the benefits from ecotourism are not spread evenly and often deepen preexisting social inequalities[13]. The need to showcase a stable and equitable social environment is only in place for the further exploitation of this environment and of the communities where nature-based tourism is consumed.

**Whale-watching as ecotourism**

The whale-watching industry seems to have arisen as a solution and in opposition to the whaling industry. In 1982, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) passed a moratorium against the commercial hunt of cetaceans; yet whale-watching activities have been carried out since the 1970s. Organizations such as WWF and Greenpeace have continued to support whale-watching as a non-lethal, less invasive, and non-consumptive industry to engage with whales,

[12] Powell and Ham.
[13] Fletcher and Neves, "Contradictions in Tourism."

aid in their conservation, and benefit ex-whalers and other local businesses[14]. It is important to highlight that not all whale-watching activities could be characterized as ecotourism, because they do not adhere to its established definitions. The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) has estimated the global value of whale-watching in 2008 at approximately $2 billion[15], with 119 countries offering commercial whale-watching services[16]. Although there seem to be organizations, such as the IWC, that have put guidelines in place to regulate whale-watching activities and ensure the well-being of the animals[17], many commercial whale-watching activities do not properly follow these animal-welfare protocols. Moreover, even if these protocols are being followed as prescribed, research has shown that it still has an impact on the behavior and well-being of the animals.

Whale-watching is also seen as an opportunity to conduct scientific research on whale populations[18]. For example, in the whale-watching tour in which I took part in September 2018, we had a member of a whale conservation organization photographing and collecting data on

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[14] Arne Kalland, "Management by Totemization: Whale Symbolism and the Anti-Whaling Campaign," *ARCTIC* 46, no. 2 (January 1, 1993): 124–33, https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic1333; Katja Neves, "Cashing in on Cetourism: A Critical Ecological Engagement with Dominant E-NGO Discourses on Whaling, Cetacean Conservation, and Whale Watching1," *Antipode* 42, no. 3 (2010): 719–41, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00770.x; Simon J. Allen, "From Exploitation to Adoration," in *Whale-Watching*, ed. James Higham, Lars Bejder, and Rob Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 31–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018166.004.

[15] Marianne Rasmussen, "The Whaling versus Whale-Watching Debate," in *Whale-Watching*, ed. James Higham, Lars Bejder, and Rob Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 81–94, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018166.009.

[16] Erich Hoyt and E.C.M. Parsons, "The Whale-Watching Industry," in *Whale-Watching*, ed. James Higham, Lars Bejder, and Rob Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 57–70, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018166.006.

[17] Carlson et al., "The International Whaling Commission (IWC) and Whale-Watching."

[18] Carole Carlson et al., "The International Whaling Commission (IWC) and Whale-Watching," in *Whale-Watching*, ed. James Higham, Lars Bejder, and Rob Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 71–78, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018166.007.

the sighted individuals[19]. Thus, whale-watching expeditions also serve to monitor whale populations, deviating from a "for profit" value and watching whales for their research value and inherent beauty.

**Whale-watching and artisanal fishing in conflict near Machalilla National Park, Ecuador**

Ecuador is a common place for whale-watching tourism. Humpback whales from the southern stock migrate from the Antarctic peninsula to the Pacific coast of Chile where they feed, to Ecuador, Colombia, and Panama where they breed between the months of June and September[20]. The whale-watching industry in Ecuador began in the 1990s and has grown steadily until now, with six major locations where it is carried out[21]. A popular destination in Ecuador is Puerto López, a small fishing village on the coast located in the province of Manabí. Parque Nacional Machalilla (or Machalilla National Park), located next to Puerto López, receives approximately 10,000 visitors annually and it represents a significant income for the fishing village as well as tourism revenues for the country.

Puerto López's most important sources of income for its inhabitants are whale-watching tourism and artisanal fishing, both activities related to the ocean and the use of its resources. In Puerto López, if one arrives early at the beach next to the harbor, one can find many small

[19] Unfortunately, I was unable to identify which organization, as the researcher remained in the captain's cabin for the entirety of the trip.
[20] Fernando Félix and Ben Haase, "Distribution of Humpback Whales along the Coast of Ecuador and Management Implications," 2005, 13.
[21] Félix and Haase.

fishing boats on the beach taking their fresh catches to the local fish market and, at the same time, see tourists embarking on their boats for their day trip in search of whales. In a conversation with our tour guide, he mentioned that the number of local whale-watching companies has grown rapidly in the last few years, as well as competition—even during high season as the number of whale-watching boats allowed at sea at a given time is strictly controlled. The ecotourism industry has boomed in Puerto López as a result of government and NGO support.[22]

A common conflict in this locality is the impact of artisanal fishing activities in areas of high whale breeding activity. Studies have shown that humpback whales, most commonly calves, are caught as bycatch in artisanal fishnets, often leading to injuries and even the death of the individual.[23] It is estimated that up to 33 whales die from entanglement in Ecuadorian waters annually.[24] Local and international NGOs have successfully convinced the Ecuadorian government to adopt national guidelines for whale conservation.[25] These guidelines include recommendations for the use of whale conservation to promote ecotourism, helping to ease the conflict and provide a more "sustainable" source of income for local fishermen, if it properly adheres to its values, reducing whale fatalities without compromising the livelihoods of local community members.

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[22] Bradley Tatar, "Whale Conservation in Coastal Ecuador: Environmentalism of the Poor or Neoliberal Conservation?," *이베로아메리카연구(Revista Iberoamericana)*, 2014, http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/handle/10371/94034.

[23] Juan José Alava, Maria José Barragán, and Judith Denkinger, "Assessing the Impact of Bycatch on Ecuadorian Humpback Whale Breeding Stock: A Review with Management Recommendations," *Ocean & Coastal Management* 57 (March 1, 2012): 34–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2011.11.003.

[24] Alava, Barragán, and Denkinger.

[25] Tatar, "Whale Conservation in Coastal Ecuador."

Yet, the conservation discourse that often accompanies ecotourism is at odds with local fishermen. Following previously established guidelines, like those of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), management plans of local fishing areas at conflict with whale presence have been put forth in Ecuador in an effort to protect the whales.[26] Büscher et al. argue that conservation policies that disregard the livelihoods of local communities by excluding them from the habitats on which these depend can be considered an imposition by global forces of "neoliberal conservation" operating as new forces of colonialism.[27] In addition, the creation of protected areas and park for the protection of natural habitats in the Global South has a history of removing the traditional rights of common access of local populations.[28]

Later, on my conversation with our guide, I asked how one may become a whale-watching guide. He replied that only local residents can be members of a crew or become guides. The guide for our particular trip said he grew up as a fishing boy, as most people in town, and then studied to obtain a license to become a guide. However, there is maximum quota of guides this given industry can have in a particular place, although Puerto López is packed with local restaurants and bars, as well as hostels and hotels that range per night from $5 to $120. Yet this still leaves a high number of members of the community outside of the ecotourism loop in this particular village.

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[26] Tatar.
[27] Bram Büscher et al., "Towards a Synthesized Critique of Neoliberal Biodiversity Conservation," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 23, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 4–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2012.674149.
[28] Tatar, "Whale Conservation in Coastal Ecuador."

The whale-watching industry in Puerto López is complicated. The guides are all part of a single labor union, they have shifts but not according to which company is sailing that particular time, but according to a schedule made exclusively for the guides, as they operate as independent consultants. They do not adhere to a single company, but rather rotate from boat to boat. A higher number of trips is desired by the guides because it translates into more income as they also receive tips from tourists. Foreigners may own the boats and the tourism companies. Tatar conducted ethnographic research among the fishermen of Salango and Puerto López, both fishing villages adjacent to Machalilla National Park. In his work, he highlights the assumption that fishermen can freely choose to change from a fishing-based income to a tourism-based income. The reality is that many community members lack the financial resources or the skills to switch to the ecotourism industry. If such agenda continues to be pushed by the Ecuadorian government, it must be done with financial, infrastructural, and educational support to ensure the sustained livelihoods of the current groups practicing artisanal fishing[29].

**Conclusions**

Despite these shortcomings, ecotourism represents a hopeful deviation from classically exploitative models. If done correctly and following the regulations that define it, ecotourism will continue to provide an opportunity for local communities to shift to more sustainable sources

[29] Tatar.

of income together with an improvement in education and social equity levels. I maintain, however, my argument that we must also promote the appreciation of nature under non-capitalistic values of beauty and balance.

The most obvious point I have learned from this essay is that the ecotourism industry, which has been sold as an alternative approach to other resource exploitation practices for the production of capital, is full of contradictions. My first whale-watching trip in California continues to be a black hole of knowledge. If taking the educational, social equity, and sustainable aspects of the definition of ecotourism, the tour in California failed to fulfill ecotourism goals, except that of the creation of revenue. As I look back through the lenses of my newly gained knowledge, my whale-watching experience was more likely detrimental than beneficial for the animals that I claim to admire and respect.

On the other hand, my whale-watching tour in Ecuador was able to teach me a lot more about the goals of ecotourism in a place where it may be more needed. The situation in Puerto López and around Machalilla National Park is complicated. It is naïve and an over-simplification to believe that promoting the ecotourism industry in these localities will fix the deep social problems of inequality and poverty, especially without the proper tools and support from those who are strongly encouraging it. Traditional ways of living must be respected, while at the same time providing realistic alternatives and working together with the parties involved.

Whales continue to be fascinatingly beautiful creatures to me, yet I must learn to adjust my environment according to my personal values. Although escaping a capitalist world is difficult and changing a system that relies on the exploitation of resources for profit even more, independently of what form these may take, it is important that we become aware of the impact we have as consumers. I will continue to participate in ecotourism activities, while being more vigilant and critical of how exactly I engage with these activities.

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This is a picture of me after spotting a brown pelican flying next to a pod of dolphins in Californian waters. Enjoy! And thank you for the course – it was truly a pleasure to attend the seminar discussions.