From whaling to whale watching: examining sustainability and cultural rhetoric

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This paper explores whaling and whale watching to determine the viability of their divergent practices – and explains why they coexist in some cases. Whale watching is often viewed as an ecotourism product and presented as an activity that is fast growing, holds potential for local regeneration, promotes conservation and sustainable practice and is ecological and profitable. Whaling is currently under considerable scrutiny and relies on economic and increasingly cultural rhetoric to support its viability. Contrary to some statements, it is rarely a long-established practice. The paper uses Japan and Iceland as examples to examine the sustainability frameworks and political rhetoric surrounding these activities, and asks whether whale watching might offer an alternative economy for the whaling/fishing communities in an era of conflict over sustainable resource use. The paper finds that whale watching participation grew from 9 million tourists in 2001 to 13 million in 2008, with revenues rising from $1 billion to $2.1 billion per annum over that period. Whaling relies heavily on state and private subsidies. We also find, however, that whaling and whale watching can co-exist, that both use sustainability-based rhetoric, but that global trends in public opinion and taste favour whale watching over whaling.

Keywords: whaling; whale watching; sustainability; ecotourism; Japan; Iceland

Introduction

The global growth in the whale watching industry since the 1980s has been substantial. Viewed by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1983 as an alternative “use” for whales, today whale watching is recognized as the most prominent form of marine-based tourism. By 2001, whale watching globally attracted over 9 million people annually, valued at over US$1 billion (Hoyt, 2001). According to the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), by 2008, there were over 13 million participants in over 119 countries, generating approximately US$2.1 billion (O’Connor, Campbell, Cortez, & Knowles, 2009, p. 8).

Alongside these whale watching tourism growth figures, whale hunting continues in Japan, Iceland and Norway, creating heated debates on resource use. Yet tourism worldwide coexists with other human activities, such as residential development, forestry, agriculture, mining, fishing and whaling. As Higham and Lusseau (2008) point out, this coexistence is managed by delicately balancing different interests.
This paper explores the coexistence of whaling and whale watching by examining the cases of Japan and Iceland. It takes its cue from a paper in the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* on the transition from whale hunting in Tonga to whale watching (Orams, 2001). That transition evolved through rhetoric on sovereign resource use and responsible management, a rhetoric common in resource management over many years. The transition relied on an ethos perhaps best expressed by the motto “take only pictures, leave only footprints”, reflecting a desire to reduce the impacts of human activity. Similar transitions are reported in debates on hunting, resource use and management (see US Forest Service debates in the 80s and 90s in Dwyer & Childs, 2004). This transition and its underpinning ethos remain part of the discourse in debates over the use of whales in both whaling and non-whaling countries. Adding complexity to the debate is the mutual use of the term “sustainability” to argue for and against whaling. Non-whaling nations tend to invoke a moral and ethical approach, while whaling nations base their arguments on culture and science.

The questions posed in this paper are: to what extent is the rhetoric of sustainability used to justify both whaling and whale watching, and why do these practices continue to co-exist in Japan and Iceland? The paper heeds calls from Corkeron (2006) and Higham and Lusseau (2007, 2008) on the urgent need for empirical research into whaling and whale watching and aims to establish how the emerging practice of whale watching impacts the practices of whaling. Following Buckley (2005), it seeks to unravel some of the complexities underpinning the debate in these countries. The case studies explore those dynamics in more detail, as globally we face economic and political imperatives to sustain current practices related to both whaling and whale watching.

The paper has four sections. The first section outlines the sustainability rhetoric within ecotourism and examines how it underpins ecotourism and related activities. The second section explores the histories and rationales for whaling and whale watching, providing examples from Japan and Iceland. The third section considers how whaling and whale watching have come to co-exist and to what extent they are compatible. It also examines the way in which the rhetoric on sustainability is used to rationalize these seemingly disparate practices. Finally, the paper summarizes the main conclusions about the sustainability of whaling and whale watching and identifies directions for future research.

**Sustainability and ecotourism**

The 1970s saw an increased sensitivity to environmental issues, popularized by academic writing, lectures and the media, the fear of nuclear fallout, the 1973 oil shock, and the growing perception of issues affecting every man. Many conservation groups were founded and grew, such as the US Sierra Club, the more technical Club of Rome, and global environmental activist groups such as Earth First, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd. These groups used a new political space, created by the shared language of “sustainability” and a more mainstream environmental agenda. Many environmental issues became prominent because they represented a broader critique of modern society, especially relationships between humans and environmental risks, many not easily detectable in nature (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998, pp. 73–74).

Ecotourism – and sustainable tourism more generally – drew on the sustainability rhetoric and the environmental agenda: ecotourism became a rapidly growing market segment located in, and using, nature. It is a threefold phenomenon (Wearing & Neil, 2009). It takes place in natural settings, with nature serving as an environment for recreation and pleasure with diverse activities, such as hiking, swimming, boating, nature gazing and
wildlife viewing. Second, it focuses on elements of the natural environment, with observation and learning, and sometimes interaction, as major components of the experience. Finally, ecotourism is supposed to move beyond enjoyment and learning – and contribute to the protection, conservation and development of natural environments and local communities (Hall & Boyd, 2005, p. 3; more details in Buckley, Weaver, & Pickering, 2008).

Ecotourism aspires to promote concern about the environment. Industrial and population development over the last century has resulted in deforestation, desertification and species extinction on a global scale. As a reaction, valuing and appreciating natural and “pristine” areas has grown. More and more people recognize the importance of preserving such places before they become compromised by development (Akama, 1996). This demand for pristine areas is best demonstrated by the global rise in the designation of protected areas and debates around their management (Eagles & McCool, 2000; Hall & Frost, 2009; Stolton & Dudley, 2010; World Database on Protected Areas, http://www.wdpa.org).

The socio-cultural framework for ecotourism development is one where the tourist and current environmental discourses steer the course of development. Current discourses in environmental responsibility are formulated most clearly in the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987) around notions of sustainability. However, the marriage between ecotourism and sustainability is not an easy one, as noted by Saarinen:

In spite of the contested nature and narrow focus in practice, the political argumentation and justification of sustainable tourism are often derived implicitly or explicitly from the idea and rhetoric of sustainable development as a holistic, future-oriented, and socially equal global-scale process. This has resulted in a conceptual confusion, criticism and a need to understand how the limits of growth could be defined and set in tourism (2006, p. 1125).

Thus, varying formulations of sustainability have been developed in the last three decades. On the global scale, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) collaborated with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), in the 2002 “International Year of Ecotourism” which elaborated the “Principles on the Implementation of Sustainable Tourism” (Wearing & Neil, 2009).

In 2005 guidelines for policymakers: Making tourism more sustainable (UNEP-WTO, 2005) defined sustainable tourism as resting on three pillars: economic, socio-cultural and environment viability. Black and Crabtree develop that definition further:

Sustainable tourism is thus not a niche market segment, but an “ideal” that balances the environmental, economic and sociocultural aspects to guarantee long-term sustainability that can (and many say should) apply to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations – including both the mass tourism and special interest segments (2007, p. 2).

Gössling and Hultman sum up ecotourism as tourism that is “environmentally and socially benign, contributing both to local economies and the conservation of protected areas, while educating the traveler about local nature and culture” (2006, p. 1). Total consensus remains elusive, however, about precisely what ecotourism is and what it means in different settings (Schellhorn, 2010; Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

Two thirds of the earth’s surface area is covered by ocean. The sustainability rhetoric translates into marine environments most simply as pure conservation. Roughly 5000 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have been established worldwide (UNEP-WCMC, 2008). Building on Kelleher’s (1999) definition of an MPA, the UNEP-WCMC has defined it as follows:

Any area of intertidal or subtidal terrain, together with its overlying water and associated flora, fauna, historical and cultural features, which has been reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment (2008, p. 17).
Keeping pace with the growing interest and concern in conserving marine environments is in the public’s interest, given the flora and fauna they contain, through the development of a holistic approach to their management. Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) is part of this process, and increasingly deployed after the 1992 Rio Summit (see Billé, 2007). Tourism is prominent in the interaction between human activity and the marine environment. Higham and Lück observe that: “Tourism activities that are set in coastal and marine environments have evolved far beyond the traditional leisure experiences of the classic resort holiday” (2008, p. 3). Masters (1998) defined marine wildlife tourism as “any tourist activity with the primary purpose of watching, studying or enjoying marine wildlife” (in Zeppel & Muloin, 2008a, p. 20).

People visiting marine environments might, therefore, be seen as passive observers of that which is to be conserved, but Zeppel and Muloin cite numerous studies indicating the benefits people draw from marine tourism, including “enhanced psychological, educational and conservation or environmental outcomes” (2008a, p. 21). Thus in order to receive benefits, these tourists must relate to the environment through both direct and indirect use – and management of these experiences becomes an issue. Many uses are not necessarily eco-friendly, such as scuba diving, kayaking and windsurfing. Others are potentially more harmful, such as jet skiing, motor boating, and fishing, requiring monitoring and management (Deng, King, & Bauer, 2002). Brightsmith, Stronza, and Holle suggest, “conservation biology can provide the scientific expertise for sound conservation; ecotourism can provide benefits to local communities and build local and international support for protected areas” (2008, pp. 2832–2833).

The ecotourist, as conceptualized above, can play a beneficial role in this process through their concern for personal development and fulfillment, including self-education (Wearing & Neil, 2009). At the same time, their involvement can benefit the region they are visiting and its nature and wildlife habitats. Tisdell and Wilson (2005) argue for the importance of learning and the interaction of tourists with wildlife, as it will contribute to their pro-conservation sentiments and actions (Wearing, 2001; Wearing & Neil, 2009).

Whale (and dolphin) watching is the most prominent segment of marine-based tourism (Higham & Lück, 2008). The visual consumption of marine mega fauna is generally viewed as a harmless activity with considerable educational and conservation benefits (Corkeron, 2004; Curtin, 2003). However, a number of researchers (Table 1) have questioned the sustainability of whale watching in terms of its impacts on wildlife and a host of management issues related to this practice, posing a challenge to the future of this activity. These include stress caused to animals, intrusion into their habitats and how to best develop whale watching so that it delivers the benefits of ecotourism to both the visitor and the host community.

Criticism notwithstanding, whale watching is generally considered to be “an acceptable form of benign exploitation” (Gillespie, 2003, p. 408). Given its notable representation in marine tourism (Higham & Lück, 2008), it can provide a mechanism for the protection and conservation of marine environments through the direct involvement of the visitor as participant observer. See Table 1 for a summary of relevant research areas on whale watching tourism.

A review of the whale watching research (Corkeron, 1996; Scarpaci et al., 2008) revealed that, so far, most studies have concentrated on the biological and behavioral aspects of whales, with little recognition given to the social aspects. This is hardly surprising, as most research concerning human–wildlife interactions has come from the biological sciences (Muloin, 1998). Duffus and Dearden (1993) were among the first researchers to investigate the “human” dimensions of whale watching in the context of managing human interaction with these creatures. They stress that both human and ecological dimensions of whale
Table 1. Issues on developing tourism around whale watching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Explication</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tr>
<td>Impacts on wildlife</td>
<td>It remains under-researched how whale and dolphin watching impacts the animals being viewed. The questions scientists, policymakers and the tourism industry are facing are how to determine the conditions under which whale watching becomes detrimental to the animals it targets, and how to best protect them.</td>
<td>Blewitt, 2008; Corkeron, 2006; Jensen et al., 2009; Lusseau, Bain, Williams, &amp; Smith, 2009; Noren, Johnson, Rehder, &amp; Larson, 2009; Parsons, Lück, &amp; Lewandowski, 2006; Scarpaci, Parsons, &amp; Lück, 2008; Sousa-Lima &amp; Clark, 2008; Weinrich &amp; Corbelli, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management issues</td>
<td>In order to effectively manage wildlife tourism, the biological impacts as well as the needs of tourists, industry and other stakeholders must to be taken into consideration.</td>
<td>Higham, Bejder, &amp; Lusseau, 2008; Stamation, 2008</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Ecotourism potential   | How tourism operations developed around whale watching fit with the ecotourism profile, by facilitating:  
  - Education  
  - Conservation  
  - Visitor satisfaction  
  - Economic potential | Amante-Helweg, 1996; Lück, 2003; Orams, 1999; Stamation, Croft, Shaunnessy, Waples, & Briggs, 2007, 2010; Zeppel & Muloin, 2008a  
  Duffus & Dearden, 1993; Lien, 2001; Zeppel & Muloin, 2008b  
  Foxlee, 2001; Valentine, Birtles, Curnock, Arnold, & Dunstan, 2004  
  Blewitt, 2008; Jensen et al., 2009; Lusseau et al., 2009; Noren et al., 2009; Peake, 2009 |
There are also a handful of nations or peoples that are allowed to continue the practice of whaling as part of their indigenous subsistence culture (such as the Faroe Islanders and the Arctic Inuit). This section presents a summary of the situations in Iceland and Japan, with a discussion of the benefits of whaling in these countries.

Whaling in Japan

Japan has a long history of regional whaling but only began widespread commercial whaling after 1945, in order to provide a much-needed post-war source of protein. Japan is currently hunting whales under the guise of its scientific research program (conducted under Article VIII of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling [ICRW]), adopted in 1987 (Clapham et al., 2003; Corkeron, 2009; Gales, Kasuya, Clapham, & Brownell, 2005; Normile, 2000, 2008). The Japanese whaling fleet departs twice a year. In November, the fleet heads to the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, a safe haven established by the IWC in 1994, to hunt minke whales, and where in recent years they have been confronted by the environmental activist group, the Sea Shepherd. In May, the Japanese fleet heads to the Northwest Pacific, where they harvest minke, bryde, sperm, sei and fin whales – the last two of which are listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) as endangered species. The whaling fleet arrives back in Japan with only the packaged consumer end product of whale meat. Excess or by-product materials from whaling are dumped back into the ocean (IFAW, 2010).

Whaling evokes a sense of nationalism. Japanese do not want to be told by western countries what they can hunt and eat, and generally see opposition as a form of cultural imperialism. While this issue is contested within Japan, it is also treated with a degree of apathy. A 2006 survey conducted by Greenpeace Japan showed that only 34% of those interviewed thought that Japan should resume commercial whaling, whereas 66% of the respondents expressed no clear opinion either way. Conversely, the Japan Fisheries Agency (which includes the whaling industry) and the bureaucrats involved in the IWC negotiations strongly support the resumption of commercial whaling. The same survey indicated that 82% of the respondents reported never having eaten whale – or not having eaten it in a long time (Takahara, 2007).

The continuation of commercial whaling in Japan would suggest that it is a profitable business. Yet whale meat and other whale by-products have made consistent losses in Japan over the past 20 years. Since 1988, an estimated US$223 million has been lost. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that the Japanese government had to invest US$12 million into the 2008–2009 Antarctic whale hunt alone just to break even (Khatchadourian, 2010).

Furthermore, Japan cannot consume the stockpile of whale meat it amasses every year. In 2009, Japan’s stockpile of 1.2 million tons of seafood included nearly 5000 tons of whale meat (Masutani, 2010). Currently, the figure reportedly stands at 4000 tons (IFAW, 2010). Stockpiling food is a common practice in Japan due to its limited self-sufficiency in food production (roughly 46%), yet the buildup of whale meat points to the question of consumption by Japanese.

In a limited number of communities Japan has recently started to serve whale meat in school lunches as part of a government initiative to reduce the stockpile – and to promote broader consumption of whale meat. Yet this practice has been criticized within Japan due to allegations of high levels of toxic methyl mercury contained in the meat – reportedly in excess of 10 times the acceptable level for consumption (Ota, 2007).

Given the dwindling market for whale meat in Japan, whaling now relies heavily upon government subsidies. In late 2009, a major review of Japanese government spending by the
Hatoyama administration resulted in massive budget cuts, including government funding for the Overseas Fisheries Cooperation Fund (OFCF), which provides loans to the Institute for Cetacean Research (ICR), the body in charge of Japan’s scientific research whaling. This is likely to have an impact on the future viability of the Japanese whaling program (Wildlife Extra, 2009).

**Whaling in Iceland**

Whaling has been undertaken around Iceland since the seventeenth century, when Basque hunters caught whales in Icelandic waters. Over the centuries, the number of nations active in the Icelandic whale hunt grew. Iceland’s own participation in commercial whaling is relatively recent, from 1949 to 1989 (resumed in 2003), and does not build upon a long tradition of whaling. Icelanders never caught whale for subsistence living, but a beached whale was considered a great windfall for the local community (Einarsson, 1987). In 1948, Iceland was one of 14 nations involved in setting up the IWC. A year later, Hvalur ehf (Whale Ltd) was founded in collaboration with Norwegian entrepreneurs, already active in whaling around Iceland, for the purpose of processing of harvested whales. Soon, Icelandic entrepreneurs took full control of the company and whaling continued unabated until 1986, at which time the IWC proposed a whaling moratorium (Jónsson, 1998). Iceland did not initially object to the ban but maintained a scientific whaling program until 1989. In 1992, Iceland withdrew from the IWC. It returned to the IWC in 2004 but included a clause in its re-entry that lodged an objection to the moratorium on whaling, citing the need for scientific research (it resumed scientific whaling in 2003) and awaiting the establishment of promised IWC whaling quotas in 2006. Based on these conditions, Iceland unilaterally decided to launch commercial whaling in 2006 since the IWC had not set quotas. The hunt targeted minke and fin whales, the latter of which is listed by the IUCN as an endangered species.

The trading of whale meat in Iceland was resumed after the 2006 whaling season started. The estimated price of fin whale meat sold to Japan was US$14 per kg in 2008 (Statistics Iceland, 2009), with each animal yielding approximately 12,000 kg of processed meat (Icelandic Marine Research Institute, 2008). Minke whale is only sold domestically for around US$12 per kg (Jónsson, 2009), with each whale yielding approximately 1800 kg of processed meat (Björdal & Conrad, 1998). The harvesting of 125 fin whales would thus create revenues of over US$20 million if sold on the international market (i.e. typically Japan). In 2010, the Institute of Economic Studies at the University of Iceland was commissioned to research the economic impact of whaling on the country, without regard for the sale of whale meat. They found that 80–90 people might be directly employed from an annual catch of 150 fin whales and 150 minke whales, which could generate approximately US$10 million in total salary (Institute of Economic Studies, 2010).

In fact, only a very limited amount of fin whale meat is exported. Of the 2009 catch, 3271 tons were processed but only 501 tons (15%) were listed as exported – 50 tons (1.5%) of which were listed as exported to Japan – the sole buyer of Icelandic whale meat (Á. Finnsson, personal communication, October 12, 2010). What remains of the rest of the processed and allegedly exported whale meat remains a mystery in Iceland, but rumor suggests that it is stockpiled in freezers. The owner of Hvalur Ltd personally subsidizes the whale hunt by transferring profits from his fisheries company, Grandi Ltd (Morgunblaðið, 2007; Viðskiptablaðið, 2010). Not surprisingly, he is perhaps the most vociferous proponent of whaling in Iceland.

The general attitude to whaling in Iceland has been documented by Gunnarsdóttir and Pórisdóttir (2010). Overall support for whaling in Iceland has exceeded 70% for the last
two decades. According to Gunnarsdóttir and Þórisdóttir (2010), this support is based on sentiments such as opposition to the image of whales as sacred, xenophobia, sovereign resource use and a pragmatic cost–benefit stance. In general, the domestic consumption of whale is growing as chefs prepare culinary guidelines to teach Icelandic people how to prepare whale meat. In 2010, for example, 60 minke whales were caught and the meat was sold out by May – the start of the 2011 whaling hunt (Fréttblaðið, 2011).

**Whale watching in Japan**

Japan has a growing whale watching industry, which started in Ogasawara in 1988. This site, as well as others throughout Japan, was once a thriving whaling station. After the IWC ban on whaling in 1986, the whale watching industry slowly started to gain prominence and profitability. Ogasawara features about 20 species of whales, including humpback and sperm whales, and spinner and bottlenose dolphins. Mori (2000) offers the following breakdown of revenues derived from whale watching and dolphin swim programs in Ogasawara in 1999: lodging US$2,216,000 (62%); boat rentals US$677,000 (18%); eating costs US$383,000 (11%), and souvenir costs US$338,000 (9%) of the total intake (Cunningham, 2002, p. 10).

There are a number of popular whale watching sites in Japan, spanning Hokkaido, Honshu, Ogasawara, Miyakejima, Mikurajima, Shikoku, Kyushu and Okinawa. Kyushu boasts the greatest number of whale watchers, recording 115,600 participants in 2008, with a total expenditure of US$8,316 million. The next most popular area for whale watching is Ogasawara, Miyakejima and Mikurajima (islands south of Tokyo), with a reported 28,700 visitors participating in whale watching through one of the 47 operators available at these locations. As of 2008, the total number of whale watchers in Japan stood at 191,970 and generated a total (direct and indirect) revenue of nearly US$23 million. Japanese account for over 90% of the whale watchers (O’Connor et al., 2009, pp. 135–141) – see Table 2.

In 2008, the total revenue generated by whale watching activities across Japan was US$22,720 million, representing a decrease of US$10 million over the last ten years (1998–2008). This is due, in part, to the relative maturity of the whale watching industry in Japan, compared with the early development and growth of whale watching in neighboring countries. For example, the average annual growth rate (AAGR) of whale watching in Japan in 2008 was 6.4%, compared with that of China (103%), the Maldives (85.5%), and Cambodia and Laos (78.8%). Since 1998, the number of whale watchers in Asia has increased fivefold, now totaling over 1 million, fuelled largely by Asia’s economic boom and the growth of local whale watchers. Yet longstanding and comparatively high prices in Japan mean that its whale watching industry continues to generate the highest revenues in Asia (O’Connor et al., 2009, pp. 120–122).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of whale watchers</th>
<th>AAGR</th>
<th>Number of operators</th>
<th>Direct expenditure</th>
<th>Indirect expenditures</th>
<th>Total expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>10,992</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>$371,000</td>
<td>$4,377,000</td>
<td>$4,748,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>55,192</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>$3,384,000</td>
<td>$20,155,000</td>
<td>$23,539,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>102,785</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>$4,300,000</td>
<td>$28,684,000</td>
<td>$32,984,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>191,970</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>$7,375,076</td>
<td>$15,345,902</td>
<td>$22,720,978</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: O’Connor et al. (2009), p. 135.*
Whale watching in Iceland

The whale watching industry in Iceland began in the late 1990s from the port of Hófn in southeastern Iceland. Total visitor numbers are rising (see Figure 1), despite concerns about the impacts of whaling on inbound tourism following the resumption of scientific whaling in 2003 (Parsons & Rawles, 2003; Sigursteinsdóttir, 2003). Tourism in Iceland generally has grown rapidly, exceeding 500,000 international arrivals for the first time in 2009, with growth exceeding 10% per annum for the last 10 years. (see Jóhannesson, Huijbens, & Sharpley, 2010). In terms of marine tourism, whale watching is “the vanguard of marine wildlife tourism” in Iceland (Higham & Lück, 2008, p. 4).

The growth of marine tourism can be illustrated by the success of the eight whale watching operators in Iceland (see http://www.icewhale.is) operating in two regions – the Faxaflói and Skjálfandaflói bays. These companies share the basic founding rational of North Sailing in Húsavík, northeast Iceland (population 2229 in 2010). Their operations build on the traditional economic base, which depends heavily upon the fishing industry – but which has suffered greatly since the 1990 restructuring. Compounding these problems was the collapse of the local co-op, severely impacting Húsavík’s employment base. North Sailing was started by fishermen in search of alternative employment in 1995, offering a variety of marine-based tours which led to the development of whale watching – now the backbone of North Sailing’s operations. A second successful local operator with a similar background, Gentle Giants, began operating in 2001. Húsavík has played a leading role in the development of whale watching, rejuvenating the local economy and promoting itself as the whale watching capital of Europe. An economic impact assessment of Húsavík whale watching operations in 2007 reported an estimated annual turnover of US$6 million, up from zero in 1995 (Guðmundsdóttir & Ívarsson, 2008).
While the increase in whale watchers in Iceland has not followed a linear path (Figure 1), the industry is growing more rapidly than the rest of Europe, averaging 17% per annum compared with 7.1% per annum. In 2008, there were 114,800 whale watchers in Iceland, compared with 825,115 in the rest of Europe, giving Iceland a European market share of 15%, though the entire European market only accounts for 6% of the world market for whale watching (O’Connor et al., 2009). Huijbens reports that the economic impact directly related to whale watching in Iceland was US$6.3 million in 2010, with a total economic impact of US$16.4 million. These figures are based on average adult ticket prices for whale watching in summer 2010 (US$65), taking into account the eight operators and total passenger numbers.

Whale watching in Japan and Iceland is a booming industry in line with worldwide growth in this economic activity. According to the IFAW, “the whale watching industry has grown at an average rate of 3.7% per year, comparing well against global tourism growth of 4.2% per year over the same period” (O’Connor et al., 2009, p. 23). Furthermore, at a regional level, average annual growth in whale watching has exceeded tourism growth rates in five of the seven world regions: Asia (17% per year), Central America and the Caribbean (13% per year), South America (10% per year), Oceania and the Pacific Islands (10% per year) and Europe (7%) (O’Connor et al., 2009, p. 23).

Are whaling and whale watching compatible?
Tómas Heiðar, Iceland’s commissioner to the IWC, believes that in his country, whaling and whale watching have co-existed successfully for a number of years, claiming that allegations otherwise are untrue. Although no conclusive evidence exists, his opinion is partially supported by inbound tourism figures, which have grown from approximately 300,000 to 500,000 (170%) since whaling resumed in 2003 and the growing trend of inbound tourists to watch whales: see Figure 1 (Jóhannesson et al., 2010). Similarly, the whale watching industry in Japan continues to grow in spite of the concurrent practice of whaling in Antarctic and Pacific waters. Between 1991 and 2008, for example, the number of whale watchers in Japan grew from 10,992 to 191,970, representing a growth rate of approximately 1750% (O’Connor et al., 2009, p. 135). Such evidence suggests that whaling and whale watching are compatible practices. However, these statistics fail to identify a number of other factors that might explain the increase in tourism and whale watchers, nor do they identify any factors associated with whaling that might diminish the growth potential of whale watching.

A nation’s decision to engage in whaling depends on revenues from the whaling industry, ecological and market linkages, and the potential for boycotts (Herrera & Hoagland, 2006). Herrera and Hoagland (2006) employ a bio-economic model to explore the linkages between whaling, commercial fishing, ecotourism and exports of a whaling nation’s other products that may be subject to boycotts or international trade sanctions. They report that scenarios exist in which whaling is economically rational, and sometimes it makes sense to subsidize this practice. They note that as whaling increases, lower-standing whale stocks are maintained and fishery rents increase. This linkage increases the marginal benefits of whaling and may occasionally lead government planners “to subsidize the entry of whaling firms beyond the open-access point or even to extirpate the predatory whale stock” (2006, p. 267).

Contrary to the purely economic rational, Lawrence and Phillips (2004) emphasize the role that popular culture plays in influencing the way we view whales. A case in point would be the 1993 film, Free Willy, in which Keiko (the captive orca) is finally released
back into the wild. Largely because of this movie’s impact, Keiko was provided sanctuary in Iceland in 1998, returning to his home waters. Keiko was released from his pen in 2002, but succumbed to pneumonia and died in 2003, ending his journey back into the wild – but not the symbolism for animal rights activists and conservationists (Free Willy-Keiko Foundation, 2010). Considering our collective history of hunting whales, the “Save the Whales” movement represents a global change in public perceptions, which humanizes whales, forcing the public to reconsider the ethics of whale hunting (Lawrence & Phillips, 2004). A recent twist in this reconsideration is the blunt statement of Patrick Ramage, the Director of the IFAW whale program, who notes: “While governments continue to debate the future of whaling, the bottom line is increasingly clear: Responsible whale watching is the most sustainable, environmentally-friendly and economically beneficial ‘use’ of whales in the 21st century” (O’Connor et al., 2009, p. 9). Aligning whale watching with ecotourism is the most common rhetoric employed to promote the practice as a sustainable one. Yet precisely how remains contested.

Brydon notes that there was ambivalence about Keiko’s plight in Iceland, where the cultural discourse on whales views such conservation efforts as irrational protests against whale hunting (2006, p. 225). Indeed, the discourse in Iceland for and against whaling is of a similar restrained and factual nature as Murata (2007) reports for Japan, but sometimes erupts into emotionally charged nationalism. An expression of this can be found in the 2009 film Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre (released in 2009). In this film, whale watching tourists who are lost at sea are rescued by a group of disillusioned, illegal whalers who proceed to massacre them. Minke whale hunters in Iceland should not be read through this movie, but they have now outfitted one of their boats for tourists. They scheduled their first trip for the spring of 2011. However, at the time of this writing (August 2011), no trip has taken place. Similarly, in Japan, the reluctance to show the Academy Award winning documentary, The Cove, about annual dolphin culling for meat and live dolphin sales, exemplifies the highly contentious nature of whaling and underlines the political and nationalistic elements of this topic. The movie takes place in Taiji, where residents reportedly believe that whaling is core to their shared community identity – and links them to their ancestors, from whom they inherited the tradition of hunting whales (IWC, 2006). In recent years, however, the social and cultural implications of local whaling have been contested and displaced by larger forces that have turned cetaceans into “eco-political resources” (Ohmagari, 2002). In Taiji, tourists can visit the whaling museum, attend a dolphin show and eat a dolphin burger during their stay. A further example is the Wakayama Whale Watching Association (WWWA). In addition to supporting and providing guidelines for whale watching, the WWWA has endeavored to promote positive relations between the local whaling and nascent whale watching industries – even holding annual social events between the two groups. Both groups share information regarding the location of whales they encounter, including the species, number, size and other data.

As documented earlier, the last 20 years represent an awakening of interest and a general fascination in observing cetaceans (i.e. whales, dolphins and porpoises) in their natural environment (Corkeron, 2004; Curtin, 2003; Muloin, 1998; Neil & Breize, 1998; Orams, 2000). Indeed, whale watching, often combined with dolphin watching and dolphin swim programs, is a rapidly growing tourism activity worldwide (Cater & Cater, 2007; Hoyt, 2001; O’Connor et al., 2009). But, following Ryan and Saward (2004, p. 246), ecotourism creates a market value for the observation of animals through the commodification of wildlife and its habitats. This model of tourism thus falls between the absolutes of conservation and commercialization, where the direct human “gaze” of wildlife is central to the experience.
Weaver (2005) argues that incorporating a comprehensive model of ecotourism – one that adopts a holistic and global approach to attractions (including whales) will promote global sustainability and serve to foster environmental awareness, concern and action. Kuo, Chen, and McAleer (2009) argue that whale watching, with its strong environmental protection objectives, may lead to a positive image in terms of animal welfare and attract more whale watching tourists. Yet at the same time, whale watching tourists visit whaling countries in large numbers. The country’s image in terms of whaling does not seem to concern them.

Twisting the sustainability rhetoric

As can be gleaned from the vignettes on whaling and whale watching above, both sides employ the rhetoric of sustainability, albeit with a distinctively different interpretation and purpose. Issues surrounding the notion of sustainability across these two platforms have been summarized in Table 3.

The first section of Table 3 concerns the environment. Both Japan and Iceland contend that scientific whaling is necessary in order to better understand and manage fisheries. This rationale is grounded in the original mission of the IWC and is based on the notion of sustainable use of natural resources. Both nations feel entitled to commercial whaling, maintaining limited catches, based on the rhetoric of sustainability and due to the dearth of

Table 3. Issues of sustainability and inherent contentions.

<table>
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<th>Whaling</th>
<th>Whale watching</th>
<th>Issues of contention</th>
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<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>Resource management – culling whale stocks for the benefits of fisheries</td>
<td>Whale’s endangered status and limited evidence on their impact on fish stocks</td>
<td>Whale’s impact on fishing stocks</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Managing nature already impacted by human habitation</td>
<td>Recognizing nature’s rights and the beauty of nature</td>
<td>What constitutes first nature?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Environmental appropriation and the commodification of nature</td>
<td>Nature for nature’s sake, the autonomy of nature</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Society</strong></td>
<td>Providing employment in a traditional sector of the economy, tapping knowledge and resources, sovereign resource use</td>
<td>Global society resource use, providing employment in a growing sector of the economy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Images of whaling as cruel, barbaric and primitive</td>
<td>Positive images of whale watching, developing a more compassionate society</td>
<td>Moral extensionism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discourse shift</td>
<td>Discourse shift</td>
<td>Whales as consumptive resources or fellow beings</td>
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<td><strong>Economy</strong></td>
<td>Employment and contribution to GDP</td>
<td>Employment and contribution to GDP</td>
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<td>Negative impacts on tourism</td>
<td>Positive impacts on tourism</td>
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evidence suggesting that the practice of whaling is unsustainable. The aim is to ensure that whales do not diminish fishing stocks, but whaling proponents argue that whales contribute to the depletion of these stocks.

The growth of whale watching reflects an evolving perception, valuing and economic use for whales, which arose from the earlier position of managing them as a renewable resource. Proponents of whale watching draw on the same sustainability rhetoric, especially the need to protect species threatened by extinction and based on an ethical argument which is premised upon whales being special creatures, personified and imbued with human-like traits that need protecting (Cater & Cater, 2007, pp. 161–164). On a basic level, this deals with the notion of “first nature” and our role in protecting it (Tuzet, 2007).

The second section of Table 3 looks at society. In Iceland, there has been an awakening of interest in the potential of tourism to stimulate local economies, especially since the 2008 financial crisis (Jóhannesson & Huijbens, 2010). This recognition has led to government initiatives to protect whale watching areas from whaling through the strategic spatial allocation of quotas. These areas span the three-hour trip reach of boats from Húsavík, Reykjavík and Hólmavík. Numerous whaling boat sightings have nonetheless been reported by whale watchers in these areas, and stakeholders on both sides claim that these regulations are useless. While such regional divisions have been hotly debated, this policy reflects recognition by government that these activities are best kept separate. While no such awakening has taken place in Japan, whaling and whale watching do cohabit certain areas such as Wakayama.

The anti-whaling discourse has its roots in “moral extensionism”, which transfers individual rights to a host of non-humans, and “deep ecology”, which recognizes humans as merely one among a myriad of organisms and objects on the planet (Whatmore, 2002, pp. 156–158). The shift in discourse from management to protection is manifest in the changing attitudes expressed by the IWC toward the regulation of whaling, resulting in the current existential cul-de-sac (Burns & Wandesforde-Smith; 2002; Nature, 2009). Proponents of whale watching use the sustainability rhetoric to call for further research addressing the ecological and human dimensions of whale watching to highlight the social importance of this recreational activity (Clark, Simmonds, & Williams-Grey, 2007; Higham & Lusseau, 2007).

The last section of Table 3 highlights the economy. Sovereign consumptive resource use is translated into employment and income. In Iceland, this has been framed through the lens of market fundamentalism. Such a view questions the viability of whaling if it were not profitable. Yet all economic indicators on returns from whaling suggest otherwise – in the case of both Iceland and Japan. Proponents of whale watching rely upon the same economic argument, with stronger support from economic metrics on the regional benefits of whale watching tours. Evidence suggests that revenues generated by whale watching in both countries increasingly outshine the dollars lost through the practice of subsidizing whaling.

As noted earlier, claims are made that the practice of whaling interferes with whale watching, although tourist numbers seem to indicate otherwise. Building off the economic rationale presented in Table 3, proponents of whale watching ask whether the growth of whale watching would be even greater if it was not impacted by whaling. This is a pertinent question in the wake of Iceland’s financial meltdown, where in 2009, tourism held on in the face of a worldwide recession, though partly due to the decline in the Icelandic currency. The same question can be posed in the case of Japan and the challenges it continues to face in a stagnant economy – in search of new markets and in promoting domestic consumption.

It seems clear that the linkage between whale watching, ecotourism and the greater discourse on sustainability serves as a driver in the evolution of the discourses on whaling.
and whale watching, especially if the latter continues to grow and helps rejuvenate local communities. The mutual and contested social, cultural, political and economic activities surrounding whaling and whale watching provide the foundation for dialogic reflection on the best way to secure the future. Local actors, interpreting local and global discourses on conservation, protection and sustainability will lead the way – but in the end, we claim that economics will speak the loudest in terms of the benefits or returns from whaling versus whale watching. Our position is supported by findings from Lawrence and Phillips (2004) who, using a case study of the development of whale watching on the western coast of Canada, argue that the emergence of this activity was made possible through the influence of a favorable discourse on whales upon local actors in the creation of new institutional structures, i.e. commercial whale watching companies – and their profitability.

Conclusion

Higham and Lusseau (2008) ask whether we are “slaughtering the goose that lays the golden egg” when pursuing whaling in times of a boom in the whale watching industry. Judging by the examples of Japan and Iceland, this seems not to be the case. The number of whale watchers continues to grow along side the activity of whaling. However, as pointed out, the practice of whaling is heavily subsidized in both Japan and in Iceland, the former through government funding and the latter through private initiative. Higham and Lusseau (2008) conclude that further research is needed on the intersection of whaling and whale watching discourses along with the sustainable management of resources. We have demonstrated the complexity of this nexus of discourses and agree that further research is indeed called for. Rather than resisting mounting political pressure to stop whaling, Japan and Iceland might be better advised to capitalize on the growing trend toward whale watching within – and beyond – their borders. By transitioning to whale watching, it is conceivable that Japan and Iceland could ensure more sustainable use of this resource and secure a more sustainable economic future, while contributing to worldwide environmental and sustainability agendas. We argue that this can be done by positioning whale watching as an ecotourism product within which its potential can be realized to build cohesion within local and global communities.

Given the economics of whaling, it is likely that this practice will gradually lose commercial viability and will have to seek alternative sources of income for those in this industry. Our research suggests that whale watching might offer such an alternative. If issues regarding the regulation and management of whale watching are addressed and resolved, whale watching is well positioned to provide an alternative to whaling – one which is environmentally and economically viable and falls within internationally accepted practices of environmental sustainability. Much new research is being published. Lambert, Hunter, Pierce, and MacLeod (2010) have examined the potential impact of climate change on whale watching. Catlin, Jones, and Jones (2012) have recently looked at issues surrounding the regulation of whale watching operators. But much more research is needed to identify the factors explaining the increase in tourism and whale watching in the waters of whaling nations, by investigating the perceptions, attitudes and values that whale watchers have toward whaling – and whether these sentiments have the potential to diminish the experience of whale watching or the growth of this industry.

Note

1. WCMC stands for World Conservation Monitoring Centre.
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