

All At Sea – The Value Of Marine Tourism In Saving Our Oceans

Over sixty percent of our planet is covered in water, yet it is incredible to think how little we know about the life in our seas. Our land based, traditional African 'Big 5' animals are the popular ones and often the subject of hotly contested conservation debates, but the animals in our oceans have little in the way of similar protection mechanisms.

Now, more than ever, there is reason for seizing the opportunity to enjoy the spectacular marine world. The state of global oceans is already a major concern to international scientific organisations, and marine tourism is a platform that provides a vital life-line, helping to raise awareness about the seas in a different way – to reveal their true value.

In South Africa's case, two different ocean systems embrace the spectacular coastline: the cool Benguela to the West, and the warm waters of the Indian to the East. Because of the unusual convergence of two currents at its tip, the biodiversity in this area is said to be so diverse that it equals the richness of the Brazilian rainforests. But who really understands what that means? What we do know is that we rely heavily on the sea not just as a source of food, but also as a place of fascination. It is the ingredient that defines the perfect holiday, and for most of us it is just a 'feel good' place to be.

We are fortunate that the coasts of Southern Africa are still teeming with a myriad of wildlife, and there are few places in the world where penguins, dolphins, whales, sharks and seals can be seen in one stretch of ocean. As anyone who has had the opportunity to be close up to these creatures knows, it is an awe inspiring and unforgettable experience.

Marine tourism is a way of facilitating education and knowledge. The combination of learning something new combined with a wonderful trip and close up animal encounters is a winning formula. The most popular marine tourism attraction is, without a doubt, shark cage diving. Though slightly controversial, the researchers and operators working in this field confirm that it is a huge opportunity to destroy the negative image of sharks and replace it with a positive one. Whale watching is growing in popularity, and along the African coastline we rely on the annual Southern Right Whale migration between July and November as a major tourism draw card. The whales visit during the traditional off peak tourism season and provide an important source of income for many coastal communities. The steady recovery of the Southern Right Whale population is in itself remarkable. After years of being hunted almost to extinction, numbers in the southern oceans are steadily increasing. These whales are extremely sociable, and appear to enjoy close encounters with humans.

Choosing a marine tourism operator should be done with care and due consideration, so as not to compromise this amazing privilege. The most ethical companies have committed themselves to accreditation by Fair Trade Tourism South Africa (FTTSA). That is not to say that all others are bad. It is a case of being a responsible consumer and asking the rights questions about the individual businesses. Like any similar experience, working with animals requires regulation, and in South Africa there are strict protocols to follow and our whale watching and shark cage diving policies are said to be the most visionary in the world. Operators must hold valid licences, which are granted selectively by Marine And Coastal Management.

Sharks and whales are fascinating, and at the same time a bit scary. Sharks because of their sinister reputation, and whales because their physical size is so overwhelming. On the other hand, everyone can appreciate the quirky personalities of seals, the playful antics of dolphins and the clumsy on land gait of penguins, a complete antithesis to their grace and efficiency in water. One would almost say that all of these animals have a good life with the freedom and vastness of the open sea to travel at will.

However in reality there are many challenges facing ocean animals in today's world. Industrial fishing is taking many fish species to the brink of extinction reducing food security and threatening jobs. The most worrying trend is the poaching of abalone and the seemingly insatiable appetite for shark fin to feed Asian market. These contributing factors are taking ocean eco systems to tipping point. Sharks are the most valuable link in the chain when it comes to maintaining the fragile balance of ocean, yet over 100 million killed each year according to recent figures from WWF. Pollution and climate change are perhaps more worrying. In fact, one of the worlds relatively undiscovered 'must see' holiday destinations is 'Plastic Island'. Found between the idyllic locations of Hawaii and California, it was an accidental discovery, made by a yachtsman taking a shortcut during an ocean race. It is also known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a man made mass of plastic litter that has found itself drawn to a certain geographical area due to the prevailing currents. This swirling mass, not quite firm enough to walk on, now covers an area twice the size of Texas on top, and up to 3 metres in depth. I guess this really is a case of 'what goes around comes around'. According to the UN Environment Programme, this rubbish-laden water poses a real risk to human health. The partly broken down plastics and chemicals get absorbed and eaten by fish. They then enter the food chain. "What goes into the ocean goes into these animals - and onto your dinner plate. It's that simple," said Dr Eriksen.

Conservation of the world's oceans is absolutely essential if we are to survive, and clever solutions need to be found to limit the damage has been done. Next time you visit the sea, take a moment to think about what is going on below its deceptively calm exterior. It's a powerful battle for survival.

As Baba Dioum the Senegalese philosopher said: 'In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught'.

www.fairtourismsa.org.za

<http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/patch.html>

www.sassi.org