



Beyond Commercial Sealing: the Potential for Marine Ecotourism

Sealers are commercial fishermen who earn, on average, less than five percent of their annual incomes from sealing. Thus, replacing primary income for individuals should the seal hunt be ended is perhaps less critical, assuming the federal government implements a sealing industry buyout. That said, development of economic opportunities in the fishing communities that participate in the seal hunt would be a positive part of any plan to move Canada beyond commercial sealing.

The growing economic importance of ecotourism

Tourism has grown rapidly in the past half century, and is now considered to be the world's largest industry,¹ contributing 10 percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product, and employing more than 10 percent of the global workforce.² Ecotourism is the fastest-growing sector of the world tourism industry, with estimates of its rate of growth ranging anywhere between 10-30% annually. Ecotourism activities now take place in virtually every country the world over. It attracts high spending tourists, with estimates suggesting its economic contribution to be between \$10 and \$17.5 billion worldwide.³

According to the Canadian Tourism Commission, tourism spending in Canada totaled \$66.8 billion in 2006, a 6.5 percent increase compared to 2005. The total tourism GDP reached \$27.4 billion in 2006 or 2 percent of Canada's GDP. Employment in Canada's tourism sector reached 633,600 jobs in 2006, for an increase of 1.9 percent over the previous year.⁴ Nature tourism is the one of the fastest growing segments of the Canadian tourism industry, enjoying a 15 percent growth annually.⁵

In Atlantic Canada, tourism generates \$3.16 Billion in revenues and 100,000 jobs, contributing 5 percent of the GDP.⁶ In contrast, Canada's fishing industry accounts for less than one half of one percent of Canada's GDP.⁷ In Newfoundland, agriculture, fisheries, forestry and hunting *combined* account for just 2.6 percent of total GDP.⁸

Marine ecotourism in fishing communities

In 2001, the European Regional Development Fund co-financed a series of reports on the development of marine ecotourism in the European Union, titled Marine Ecotourism for the Atlantic Area (META). The META reports noted that, "many peripheral coastal regions face declining marine industries" and that "marine ecotourism

¹ Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection. 2001. A sea of troubles. Rep. Stud. GESAMP No. 70, 35 pp. ISBN 82-7701-010-9.

² Mullis, B. 2005. "Why Sustainable Tourism and Travel." <http://www.environmentallyfriendlyhotels.com/sustainable-travel.html>

³ Garrod, B. and Wilson, J.C. (2003) Preface. In B. Garrod and J.C. Wilson (eds) Marine Ecotourism: Issues and Experiences (p. viii) Clevedon: Channel View.

⁴ Canadian Tourism Commission. 2006. Year In Review. http://www.corporate.canada.travel/docs/research_and_statistics/stats_and_figures/tourism_year-in-review_2006_web_eng.pdf

⁵ Canadian Tourism Commission. 2001. Outdoor Tourism: an Industry Profile and Resource Guide.

http://www.corporate.canada.travel/docs/research_and_statistics/product_knowledge/Outdoor_Tourism_reformatted_EN.pdf

⁶ Industry Canada. 2005. Tourism. <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/epic/site/dsib-tour.nsf/en/qq00079e.html>

⁷ Fisheries and Oceans Canada. 2000. Ocean Economy. http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/communic/statistics/oceans/economy/contribution/table3_4_e.htm

⁸ Fisheries and Oceans Canada. 2004. Socioeconomic Impact of the Atlantic Coast Seal Hunt.

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/socio_seals_/socio_seals_en.pdf

offers a means to implement policies for economic regeneration, job creation and sustainable development that respects, and even enhances, the natural environment in which it takes place.”

The META reports noted, “...a feature shared by many peripheral areas is an abundance of pristine coastal and marine environments: the kinds that contain the species, ecological attributes and landscape features that are highly sought after by ecotourists...examples of species that are popular targets for marine ecotourism around the world include cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises), sharks, seals, sea lions, penguins, crocodiles and polar bears, as well as numerous other species of birds and fish...For many declining fishing communities in the EU Atlantic Area, there is a congruence of potential for the development of marine ecotourism.”

The reports concluded, “Marine ecotourism may be able to help regenerate coastal communities, and address low incomes, low levels of investment, high unemployment, out-migration, and so on. Moreover, marine ecotourism is thought to offer a special opportunity to achieve environmentally sound, sustainable development – development that will help to meet the needs of the present generation without damaging the resource base for future generations.”⁹

Marine ecotourism can be a viable industry in Canadian sealing communities

In Canada, ecotourism has a tremendous potential to provide revenue for coastal communities and jobs for local residents. Canada’s abundant wildlife, open space and beautiful landscapes are considered some of the key factors that motivate foreign tourists to visit Canada.

Each year, millions of visitors (more than 6 million in 2008) participate in whale watching in North America, generating important revenues (nearly \$1.2 Billion in 2008) and jobs in coastal economies.¹⁰ In Newfoundland—Canada’s main sealing province—over 1.3 million whale watchers already contribute nearly \$20 million in annual revenues to the provincial economy.¹¹ There is likely a strong potential for development of whale watching in Newfoundland, in that whale watching tourism expenditures in British Columbia are more than three times greater, at \$69 million.¹² Many Atlantic Canadian sealing communities are located in close proximity to whale migration routes and possess tourism infrastructure, making them good potential sites for whale tours.

While seal watching has remained largely undeveloped by the Canadian government, tremendous opportunities also exist for expansion of this industry, with seal watch tours already available in a number of communities on Canada’s East Coast.¹³ In the 1980s, a seal watch program was initiated in the Magdalen Islands with the goal of providing an economic alternative to the commercial seal hunt.¹⁴ In 2007, a Canadian Press story recently reported that seal ecotourism brings in about \$1 million to the Magdalen Islands economy annually, with visitors coming from as far away as Japan, France, Italy, the UK and Germany.¹⁵ In contrast, over the past two years, commercial sealing brought in virtually nothing to the local economy.

Clearly, marine ecotourism provides a tremendous opportunity for sustainable economic development in a number of coastal communities currently involved in commercial sealing.

⁹ Garrod, B., Wilson, J.C. and Bruce, D.M. (2001) Planning for Marine Ecotourism in the EU Atlantic Area: Good Practice Guidance. Bristol: University of the West of England.

¹⁰ Cisneros-Montemayor A.M., U.R. Sumaila, K. Kaschner and D. Pauly. The global potential for whale watching. *Marine Policy* (in press)

¹¹ Hoyt, E (2005). Sustainable ecotourism on Atlantic islands, with special reference to whale watching, marine protected areas and sanctuaries for cetaceans, *Biology and Environment: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 105B(3), pp141-154. <http://www.ria.ie/cgi-bin/ria/papers/100498.pdf>

¹² Hoyt, Erich. 2001. Whale Watching 2001: World Tourism Number, Expenditures, and Expanding Socioeconomic Benefits.

¹³ <http://www.bontours.ca/thetours/seal.html> and <http://www.guidetoadventures.com/operators.asp>

¹⁴ Natural Habitat. “Natural Habitat Adventures’ 20 Years of Sustainable Tourism.” Fact Sheet.

<http://www.nathab.com/images/pics/MEDIA%20ROOM/NatHab%20Backgrounder%20-%20Green%20-%20JAN07.doc>

¹⁵ Morris, C. February 25, 2008. Gulf of St. Lawrence seal nursery a unique travel experience. <http://travel.canoe.ca/Travel/News/2008/02/25/4875606-cp.html>