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Launching of the “High Quality Whale-Watching” certification

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The “High Quality Whale-Watching” certification was created in a Specially Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance: the Pelagos Sanctuary. The Pelagos Sanctuary is a tripartite agreement between France, Monaco and Italy, signed in 1999 and ratified in 2002. This marine protected area is managed by the Pelagos Permanent Secretariat but the certification project was registered by ACCOBAMS (Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic Area) and led by Souffleurs d’Ecume.

Souffleurs d’Ecume is a French non-profit organisation created in 2000 by Pascal Mayol to maintain cetacean populations at a favorable conservation status. Souffleurs d’Ecume has two main fields of expertise. The first one is the mitigation of strikes between ships and cetaceans and the second one is the management of the whale-watching activity which is the aim of the project.

Whale-watching has economic, cultural and educative advantages and it is a growing commercial activity (+3.5% a year). But, in 2005, a diagnosis revealed disturbing observations like harassment and biological disturbances. In conclusion, this activity was not sustainable. From these observations, the Pelagos Sanctuary created a project: the federation of whale-watching operators with a voluntary and concerted management. In 2010, ACCOBAMS approved the certification specifications and registered it in 2014. This project promotes a reasonable and sustainable whale-watching activity for a sustainable commercial activity, and eventually, a long-term viability of cetacean populations.

Obtaining the certification requires the operator to commit to the specifications. Souffleurs d’Ecume is in charge of controlling this commitment and managing the communication plan. Instigators of the certification, ACCOBAMS and Pelagos have been the initial partners of the project, joined by MedPAN in 2014. The GIS3M (Group of Scientific Interest for Mediterranean Marine Mammals) also contributed to the project.

In summer 2014, 11 operators signed the specifications and obtained the certification. We expected 10 more operators for 2015. We will propose a new training course session in spring 2015 and we expect 20 new trained people. Finally, we will highlight the quality certification with the creation of a dedicated website, and we will publish some educative guides on whale-watching.

